

*On Falling in  
Love  
and Other Matters*

*Alfred Turner*



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*ON FALLING IN LOVE*  
*AND OTHER MATTERS*









*Madison & B. portrait, p. 50*

*Lady Caroline Lamb  
in her page's costume. from a miniature  
in the possession of John Murray.*

*On Falling in Love*  
*and Other Matters*

By  
*Alfred Turner*



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I

*THE POETS WHEN THEY FALL  
IN LOVE*

"Come hither, boy: if ever thou shalt love,  
In the sweet pangs of it, remember me;  
For such as I am, all true lovers are,  
Unstaid and skittish in all motions else,  
Save in the constant image of the creature  
That is belov'd."

*"Twelfth Night."*

"I must have people to love me: I can't do without everyone loving me."

*J. M. Barrie ("Little Mary").*



## I

# *The Poets when they fall in Love*

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**T**HERE seems to be some fatal quality in the artistic temperament that shipwrecks the poet lover and is always at war with the domesticities. Poets have never made constant lovers or prudent and sober husbands. Of course there have been famous exceptions like Wordsworth, who once said it was not because poets possessed genius that they made unhappy homes, but because they did not possess genius enough. But Wordsworth married a woman whose loyalty and affection, unchanged and unchangeable through every period of his life, exalted her sex for ever in his eyes; she was apostrophised in one of the tenderest couplets to be found in the whole range of amorous poetry :—

“Nought in loveliness compares  
With what thou art to me.”

Mrs. Browning comes nearest to this ideal of any other poet's wife we know; she was herself a poet, and therefore abiding proof that congeniality of sentiment need not necessarily disturb the harmonies of domestic life. Shelley had not the same experience with Harriet, who also wrote

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poetry, nor was he much better off with Mary Wollstonecraft, the daughter of a poet. One view is that a poet's wife should always admire her husband's performances, and pardon his infirmities. But this is a counsel of perfection, and women are only human.

But, on the whole, I think it will be found that the fault is on the side of the poet—both in the rôle of lover and in that of husband. He is, as was said of Carlyle, difficult to live with. As an instance of this : Mrs. Carlyle, with the best of intentions, once sat knitting while Thomas wrote. The sage complained of the noise her needles made, and accordingly she stopped, and sat motionless. “Jane,” he said, “I can hear you breathing !” Now, Mrs. Carlyle ought to have understood. Perhaps Lady Byron, who once checked the inspiration of genius under similar circumstances, had much more cause for complaint. She knocked at her husband's study door to tell him dinner was ready, and remarked apologetically, “Am I in your way ?” “Yes, damnably !” was Byron's retort.

One would think there was no sufficient reason why a man should not write excellent poetry and be a good husband, but usually it has been the case that the better his poetry the more numerous his frailties.

It was Byron who said his handwriting was as bad as his character. He might have added that as his poetry grew in force and splendour, his morals continued to decline. The lady who said she was surprised to hear that the poet had any morals at all, took him at his own estimate ; but while he glorified his vices absurdly, he once peremptorily ordered a young gentleman on his estate to marry the girl

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he had deceived. Some of Burns's tenderest verse was written on his favourite light-skirts.

The domesticities nowhere make a fine figure in poesy. Prior's Chloe is reputed to have been a common drab who ran away with the poet's plate, and Dr. Johnson mentions that after an evening in the sparkling company of Oxford and Bolingbroke and Pope, Prior would "go and smoke a pipe and drink a bottle of ale with a common soldier and his wife." But this, I take it, may have been the shortest cut to earth again.

The great poets have never lacked apologists for their weaknesses, whether their wives were to blame or not. The line these apologists have usually taken is that if we have poets, we must pay for them. And it is always the women who pay. It might have been infinitely better for the greatest English poets (to say nothing of their women) if they had followed the example of Thomson, the author of "The Seasons," and shunned "the flowery tempting paths of love." But it might have been much worse for the world. There is just the possibility that some of them might never have been great poets at all.

What they learned in suffering and transgression they told in song, and often the sweet romance of a youthful passion has been the inspiration of their finest work. Shakespeare declared that:—

"Never durst poet touch a pen to write  
Until his ink were tempered with love's sighs."

The poets who thought like Thomson are few indeed. Herrick wrote a poem in praise of bachelorhood, and

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yet he was the author of that immortal phrase the "tempestuous petticoat." Goldsmith was never in love. Swift, although his connection with Vanessa and Stella will always rank amongst the most remarkable romances in literature, seems to have been constitutionally incapable of passion, and sacrificed the happiness of two women to the gratification of his own vanity. The fact that he wrote delightful love letters does not prove that he was in love. The Dean, we know, could write finely upon a broomstick, and as both his ladies were by no means ill-looking, the task of corresponding with them must have been both easy and agreeable.

Byron was perhaps the last of the fashionable poets in whom beauty and genius combined to make the petted darling of drawing-rooms and the idol of sentimental young ladies who suspected themselves of the literary gift. There are no Lady Caroline Lambs that we know of nowadays, and it is considered no part of a liberal education for young ladies to go steadily through a heated course of sentimental novel reading. The daintiest and oftenest quoted lines ever spoken by man to maid were written by the rejected lover of a fashionable beauty :—

" I could not love thee, dear, so much  
Lov'd I not honour more."

These lines are remembered while their author is forgotten. The story goes that he took to drink because the lady they celebrated looked for a husband elsewhere. That was an entirely unromantic sort of consolation, and one cannot help thinking that Waller found a better way

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## *The Poets when they fall in Love*

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out of the difficulty when Sacharissa jilted him. He married a widow. But his supreme triumph came in after years; he met the imperious lady in her old age, and she good-humouredly inquired when he was going to write such verses on her again. "When you are as young, madam," said he, "and as handsome as you were then!"

It was always dangerous in those days for dull women to ruffle witty poets. A garrulous lady is said to have compared Mrs. Milton, then not on the best of terms with her lord, to a rose. "Well," the author of "Paradise Lost" dryly observed, "I'm no judge of colour, but it may be so; I've often felt the pricks."

How many women owe their immortality to the pen of the poet? The roll, at any rate, includes Laura and Beatrice, both of whom may be said to have come very near canonisation; Spenser's Elizabeths, Shelley's Harriet and Mary, Byron's Mary Duff, the Highland lassie of his dreams (who stands outside the gallery of soft tigresses like Haidee), Burns's Highland Mary and Jean, Mary Hutchinson, who became Mrs. Wordsworth (the phantom of delight), and Coleridge's Sarah and Mary Evans. These were either lovers or wives or both. Herrick made his servant-maid immortal in a gem of four lines:—

"In this little urn is laid  
Prudence Baldwin, once my maid;  
From whose happy spark here let  
Spring the purple violet."



II

*BYRON AND HIS EARLY LOVE  
AFFAIRS*



“Out upon it! I have loved  
Three whole days together;  
And am like to love three more,  
If it prove fair weather.”

*Sir John Suckling.*

“By Heaven, I do love; and it hath taught me to rhyme and to  
be melancholy; and here is part of my rhyme and here my melan-  
choly——”

*“Love’s Labour’s Lost.”*

“And all my story—that much passion slew me.”

*Keats.*



## II

# *Byron and his Early Love Affairs*

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LORD BYRON must be ranked as the greatest gallant of all the great poets. His amours live after him in books that occupy no less than twelve pages of the British Museum Catalogue, a vast budget of fact and fiction full of human interest and revealing a tragedy which is as moving as anything in literature—the tragedy of a great heart consumed by fierce and angry passions.

If Byron has been written down unjustly as a wild profligate who played with women's hearts for mere wantonness he has only himself to blame. Throughout his life he had the incorrigible trick of multiplying his own intrigues, and setting down in the frankest possible manner every particle of evidence that could be thought to give the world a shock and throw an evil glamour over his name. No man ever took the world more thoroughly into his confidence. In everything he wrote, he affected to despise its opinion, yet fame and notoriety were to him as the breath of life. He had no sooner begun to write than he published the fullest details of the romantic attachments of his earliest years. And the environment of

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## *Byron and his Early Love Affairs*

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Byron was peculiarly favourable to the production of just such a man as he was. His father was a notorious rake, who after breaking the heart of one woman, married the mother of Byron, and squandered the estates in profligacy. The lady was one of the Gordons of Gight, and when the pair came together, a Scottish rhymester—and a prophet into the bargain—produced the following rhyme:—

“O whare are ye gaen, Miss Gordon ?  
O whare are ye gaen, so bonny and braw ?  
Ye’ve married, ye’ve married wi’ Johnny Byron,  
He’ll squander the lands o’ Gight awa’.

“The youth is a rake, frae England he’s come ;  
The Scots dinna ken his extraction ava !  
He keeps up his missus, his landlord he duns,  
That’s fast drawin’ the lands o’ Gight awa’.”

Byron was born with the strongest appetites. His adolescence was passed under the care of a mother herself incapable of self-control, and blind to the virtue of a good example. He was taken to Scotland at an early age, and it was there that love and poetry had a beginning with him. Dante fell in love with Beatrice at nine, and Canova felt the same passion at the age of five. Byron was only eight when he met a little Scotch girl named Mary Duff, and years afterwards, when his gallantries were the talk of Europe, he recalled the incident:—

“I have a passion for the name of Mary,  
For once it was a magic sound to me.”

Seventeen years afterwards, when he was reflecting on the romance of his boyhood, he wrote in his Journal:—

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## *Byron and his Early Love Affairs*

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"I have been thinking lately a good deal about Mary Duff. How very odd that I should have been so utterly, devotedly fond of that girl when I could neither feel passion nor know the meaning of the word. . . . I have been attached fifty times since that period yet I recollect all we said to each other, all our caresses, her features, my restlessness, sleeplessness, my tormenting my mother's maid to write for me to her, which she at last did to quiet me. How very pretty is the perfect image of her in my memory—her dark brown hair and hazel eyes, her brown dress. I should be quite grieved to see her now; the reality, however beautiful, would destroy, or at least confuse the features of the lovely Peri which then existed in her, and still lives in my imagination at a distance of more than 16 years."

At twenty-five he composed a song in memory of his Highland lassie, and after flinging it into the fire said, "Mary Duff was my first of flames before most people begin to burn." During the next seven years he formed two more juvenile attachments. He was twelve and a half when he professed to fall in love with his cousin Margaret Parker, and at fifteen was wildly enamoured of Mary Chaworth. It may be said that love and poetry began with him almost at one and the same time. When Margaret Parker died of consumption, he wrote the following elegy:—

"Hushed are the winds and still the evening gloom,  
Not e'en a zephyr wanders through the grove,  
Whilst I return to view my Margaret's tomb,  
And scatter flowers on the dust I love."

This was Byron's first dash into poetry, and many an amateur has beaten it easily. The effect of passion on the poet was in his own words that "I could not sleep. I could not eat. I could not rest."

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## *Byron and his Early Love Affairs*

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Byron was fond, in his after life, of conjuring up in memory these juvenile attachments and gilding them with all the romance of poetry. There is, for example, the love affair with Mary Chaworth, a young heiress, whose estates lay next to his own. Many of the contributors to the existing mass of Byron literature have expressed the view that if instead of marrying a hunting squire, this young lady had joined her fortunes to those of Byron, the whole course of the poet's life might have been changed. Byron seems to have thought so too. The pair met at Newstead, and Byron confesses that the ardour of love was all on one side. The young lady's heart was given to another, and her sentiments towards the poet were brutally expressed in the remark made at a dance :—"Do you think I care anything for that lame boy ?"

Such symptoms of calf love as the writing of frenzied farewells in doubtful, despairing verse are not peculiar to noble lords. But young Byron's melancholy was of a quite exceptional kind. Whether the version of Miss Chaworth's repulse of the poet is a correct one or not, the cruel reference to his infirmity wounded him very deeply. But it is doubtful whether the disappointment and bitterness he felt had anything like the powerful influence on the poet's future life and conduct which Moore and other writers would have us believe. The evidence of plaintive and melancholy verse provided at intervals of a few months, for some years, is not conclusive testimony in the case of Byron. It is but the glow of imaginative after-thought that bears so strongly on everything of an impersonal nature in his writings. When Burns lost Ellison Begbie,

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## *Byron and his Early Love Affairs*

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he declared that the light of his life had gone out. In this he only delivered himself as a poet. It was the same with Byron. If he laid on the dark colours with great freedom, he was of a melancholy temperament at the best. But his state of mind must not be assumed to be quite as bad as he would have us believe from the despairing lines he wrote soon afterwards :—

“O memory ! Torture me no more,  
The present's all o'ercast ;  
My hopes of future bliss are o'er,  
In memory veil the past.”

Up to the time of leaving college and setting out on his travels in Spain, Byron sounded the deepest depths of anguish and despair in everything he wrote. This was in reality the first workings of that colossal egotism which he cultivated throughout his life. At nineteen he wrote : “Since I left Harrow, I have become idle and conceited from scribbling rhyme and making love to women.” Among his favourite authors were Rabelais and Rousseau and Sterne, and at Newstead, the ancestral home,

“Where superstition once had made her den  
Now Paphian girls were known to sing and smile.”

Although, as events proved, Miss Chaworth's married life resulted in nothing but abject misery, the reading of the tender verses in “The Farewell,” and those he wrote on first seeing that lady's child, do not convince us that



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## *Byron and his Early Love Affairs*

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she would have been any more fortunate in choosing Byron. Indeed, he said himself in "Childe Harold" :—

" Ah, happy she ! To 'scape from him whose kiss  
Had been pollution unto aught so chaste ;  
Who soon had left her charms for vulgar bliss,  
And spoiled her goodly lands to gild his waste  
Nor calm domestic bliss had ever deigned to taste."

Byron now embarked on that famous tour during which he wrote "Childe Harold," and flung himself into the follies and dissipation of the East with the full strength of his arduous and passionate nature. It would be a debasement of the word to say that any of the numerous attachments which he made in the course of his tour through Spain and the Isles of Greece were inspired by love. The poet did not hesitate in his letters to avow frankly that he regarded woman mostly as a fine animal, and was in favour of treating her as such. "The whole of the present system with regard to the female sex," he wrote, "is a remnant of barbarism, of the chivalry of our forefathers" ; and again, "They ought to mind home, to be well fed and clothed, but not mix in society ; well educated, too, in religion, but to read neither poetry nor politics ; they should indulge in music, drawing, dancing, also a little gardening and ploughing now and then." However much he despised the sex in his heart, and advertised to the world his unhappy relations with them, Byron was their slave. He revelled in an intrigue, and delighted to be known as a rake. His letters are full of descriptions of rich Eastern beauties. He ran the risk of a stiletto for robbing

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## Byron and his Early Love Affairs

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a Venetian of his wife, and the popularity of his "Corsair" in the boudoirs of London inspired him with a childish vanity.

He passed from passionate adoration one day to contemptuous indifference and hate the next. In a letter to Mr. Hodgson, he says in a fine burst of temper, "Never mention a woman again in any letter to me, or even allude to the existence of the sex," and in his Journal, we find this memorandum: "The more I see of men the less I like them. *If I could but say so of women, too, all would be well. Why can't I?*"

Burns asked himself a question very much to the same effect, and failed to answer it.

The record of the greater part of Byron's amorous experiences with his Spanish, Venetian, and Italian ladies is to be found in his poems, for, as he says in "Don Juan":—

"Men who partake all passions as they pass  
Acquire the deep and bitter power to give  
Their images again as in a glass."

At Lisbon he encountered two Spanish ladies, one of whom cut off a lock of his hair and presented him in return with one of her own, about three feet in length, which he forwarded to his mother. As he knew no Spanish, the flirtation was conducted by the aid of a dictionary, and is thus described in verse:—

"'Tis pleasing to be school'd in a strange tongue  
By female lips and eyes—that is, I mean  
When both the teacher and the taught are young,  
As was the case at least where I have been."

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## *Byron and his Early Love Affairs*

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Florence, of Malta, the lady who was idealised in "Childe Harold," awakened a romantic interest in Byron's breast, (1) because she had been shipwrecked, (2) had married unhappily, (3) had to fly from Bonaparte, (4) had several times risked her life, (5) was not then twenty-five years of age—a truly remarkable record. Here at any rate for once was the spectacle of Byron maintaining a purely platonic connection:—

"Thus Harold deem'd as in that lady's eye  
He look'd, and met each beam without a thought  
Save admiration glancing harmless by."

Then followed the acquaintance, equally platonic, with a Greek lady to whom was addressed the famous song commencing, "Maid of Athens, ere we part"; a few encounters with robbers; a passion for a married lady; and a challenge and an "attachment" to three more Grecians. These incidents in the panorama of Byron's lovemaking are a curious prelude to a moral letter he wrote to his mother, who informed him that an illegitimate child had been born on his estate. "I will have," he replied, "no gay deceivers on my estate, and I shall not allow my tenants a privilege I do not permit myself—that of debauching each other's daughters. God knows I have been guilty of many excesses, but as I have laid down a resolution to reform, and lately kept it, I expect this Lothario to follow my example and begin by restoring this girl to Society, or, by the beard of my father, he shall hear of it."



III

*THE STORY OF LADY CAROLINE  
LAMB*

“ ——Remember, 'midst your wooing,  
Love has bliss, but Love has ruing ;  
Other smiles may make you fickle,  
Tears for other charms may trickle.”

*Thomas Campbell.*

“ Last night, when some one spoke his name,  
From my swift blood that went and came  
A thousand little shafts of flame  
Were shiver'd in my narrow frame.”

*Tennyson.*

### III

## *The Story of Lady Caroline Lamb*

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THE five years intervening between Lord Byron's arrival in England after his first tour and the final leave-taking of England witnessed the famous and foolish infatuation for Lady Milbanke's cousin, Lady Caroline Lamb.

Byron was always so utterly frank in stating the views he took of a man's responsibilities to a partner in gallantry that the patient endeavour of so many of his biographers to palliate his conduct to Lady Caroline Lamb appears to be altogether unnecessary. "I own I feel provoked," he wrote, referring to some of the wild spirits of the time, "when they dignify all this by the name of love, romantic attachment for things marketable for a dollar." Byron was attracted to women by a purely animal affinity; the freedom and voluptuous ecstasy with which in his letters and journal he descants on their physical charms is sufficient proof of this. In the affair with Lady Caroline Lamb, Byron acted just precisely as any one else, with the same headstrong passions, and equally vain of feminine conquest, would have acted towards a young, beautiful, and impetuous creature who forced herself into his life. There are a few

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## *The Story of Lady Caroline Lamb*

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Josephs but many Potiphar's wives. He never in his life turned a pleasure from his path. Indeed, like Don Juan, he would have accounted a man a great fool who let slip a chance of an intrigue with a pretty woman.

It is plain, too, that Lady Caroline Lamb deliberately provoked her own sufferings. Her conduct was the reflection of a wilful and capricious nature, and an imagination heated by a course of vicious French novels. When a mere girl, she wrote a foolish novelette treating of the seduction of a beautiful heroine by a wicked nobleman. Her school-mates nicknamed her "Spite" and "Young Savage," and when she entered into rivalry with her own cousin, Miss Milbanke, for the questionable honour of Byron's affections, the lady who gained the day referred to her as a piece of "beautiful silliness" and "fair-seeming foolishness," both of which epithets were emphatically just. She did not enter into the intrigue with Byron blindly ignorant of his reputation. Men of Byron's stamp require as a preliminary to any serious attachment that the attractions of the lady shall be set off by an element of piquancy and wilfulness. Light conquests are valued least. The prize must be won with wrestling. As likely as not Lady "Caro" was playing a part when she deliberately snubbed the poet at Lady Westmoreland's. The effect of her refusal even to be introduced to him was sufficient to touch the vanity of Byron. That was his weakest spot. Henceforth he was imbued with all the ardour of the chase. Few men were then more irresistible; for Byron, besides being dangerously beautiful, as a woman might be beautiful, managed to veil his real character by an affection of lofty

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## *The Story of Lady Caroline Lamb*

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grandeur, and to simulate a passion for romance and sentiment which completely fascinated the other sex. There is a famous entry which Lady Caroline made in her diary regarding Byron: "Mad, bad, and dangerous to know." Yet after the second and third meeting between the pair, they were the very best of friends. In one of her first letters to the poet, she compared herself to the passionate sunflower which awaits for the condescending sun to shine on it. She offered him her jewels. She ran all over London after him. Her extravagances led the Duchess of Devonshire to protest. In short, she outrivalled in hysterical Byromania the lusty Venetian who later on threw herself into the canal to please her lover.

With Byron the period of satiety quickly followed. It is not surprising to find him rebuking Lady Caroline somewhat harshly for proposing to enter his apartment in the dress of a page. "Every word you utter," he wrote, "every line you write proves you to be either sincere or a fool. Now as I know you are not the one, I must believe you the other." Byron, little as he cared ordinarily for what the world said, was in no mood just now for enduring the scandal which would follow an open recognition of the relationship existing between them. He declared artlessly that what she said about love so indiscreetly and with such tiresome iteration, he felt acutely. But he continued to bear with the lady's eccentricities, and in the summer of 1812, a few months before she burned his effigy, she wrote: "How very pale you are!" anticipating the comment which Byron, years afterwards, said he wished the ladies to make on his personal appearance. "I never see you,"

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## *The Story of Lady Caroline Lamb*

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she continued, in the same hysterical strain, "without wishing to cry ; if any painter could paint me that face as it is, I would give him anything I possess on earth—not one has yet given the countenance and complexion as it is."

Now we come to a curious development in this amazing story. Byron, anxious apparently to be done with the business, wrote to Lady Caroline Lamb that famous letter which, whilst it was meant to be a last farewell, was not in the least calculated to produce a feeling of resignation in the breast of the recipient :—

" God knows, I never knew till this moment the madness of my dearest and most beloved friend. I cannot express myself—this is no time for words—but I shall have the pride, a melancholy pleasure, in suffering what you yourself can scarcely conceive, for you do not know me. I am about to go out with a heavy heart, for my appearing this evening will stop any absurd story to which the events of the day might give rise. Do you think now I am cold, and stern, and wilful ? Will ever others think so ? Will your mother ever ?—that mother to whom we must indeed sacrifice much more, much more on my part, than she shall ever know or can imagine. ' Promise not to love you ! ' Ah, Caroline, it is past promising ! But I shall attribute all concessions to the proper motive and never cease to feel all that you have already witnessed, and more than ever can be known, but to my heart—perhaps to yours. May God forgive, protect, and bless you, ever and ever, more and more.—Yours most attached,

" BYRON."

Then comes that enigmatical postscript containing the significant sentence upsetting everything that had gone before :—

" I was, and am, yours freely ! And entirely to obey, to honour, to love, and to fly with you, when, where, and how yourself might and may determine."



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## *The Story of Lady Caroline Lamb*

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One writer has said that the only intelligible explanation of this curious footnote is that it was meant as a concession to the lady's feelings. We can say nothing more convincing, and anything less is hardly possible. But the mad infatuation of the lady was proof against all remonstrances. After she was sent away to Ireland, a course of persecution followed, and the poet, weary of the connection, wrote another letter of dismissal, commencing: "I am no longer your lover," and containing the harsh advice, "correct your vanity, which is ridiculous, exert your absurd caprices upon others, and leave me in peace." The case of Lady Caroline Lamb is not one in which it can be truthfully said that the woman was more sinned against than sinning. She played into Byron's hands, as did other women with less opportunities of knowing his real character; and she paid the penalty.

It was the poet's destiny to inspire in his women, with perhaps the notable exception of Lady Byron, a passionate worship which counted as nought honour, the world, regard of friends, and everything beside its object, and which, moreover, endured to the end of the story.

Through bitterness and contempt, in the frenzy of her rage and disappointment with Byron, when she burned his effigy, and spoke an address over the flames, "Caro's" heart belied her speech. One word from the poet would have brought her to his side. The rose and carnation he gave her a few days after their first meeting she bedewed with tears, and cherished as precious souvenirs of happier days. When by a dramatic coincidence she met the funeral of her lover on its way to Newstead Abbey, she was

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## *The Story of Lady Caroline Lamb*

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overcome with grief, and wrote: "I am very sorry I ever said one unkind word against him." To Medwin she declared, "He broke my heart, and still I love him."

Of all Byron's women, this poor "soiled queen of society" suffered the most at his hands. Lady Byron, who was made of sterner stuff, could separate herself from her husband from a sense of duty and self-respect. But Lady Caroline Lamb, knowing the worst that was to be known against the poet, continued to give him all her love and worship, and in a pathetic last letter shed tears of joy over a book in which her name was coupled with Byron's to the shame of them both.



IV

*BYRON AND HIS WIFE*

“Can you keep the bee from ranging,  
Or the ringdove's neck from changing?  
No! Nor fetter'd Love from dying  
In the knot there's no untying.”

*Thomas Campbell.*

“That man that hath a tongue, I say, is no man,  
If with his tongue he cannot win a woman.”

*“The Two Gentlemen of Verona.”*

“When Love is once dead  
Who shall awake him?  
Bitter our bread  
When Love is once dead  
His comforts are fled,  
His favours forsake him.  
When Love is once dead  
Who shall awake him?”

*Arthur Symons.*

#### IV

### *Byron and his Wife*

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LORD BYRON'S engagement to Miss Milbanke after two proposals, and his subsequent marriage, have been handled from every point of view by many ingenious writers who delight to fish in troubled waters. It is an absolutely hopeless task to attempt to disentangle the fact from the fiction in this remarkable story. Byron had so accustomed the world to hearing all the details of his private and domestic life, his intrigues, his debts, his mad dissipations, that when the separation from his wife took place, there was a ready market for the most scandalous inventions and the most cruel and unfounded gossip. Every scrap of information on the subject found its way into print. There were charges and counter-charges; books by Byron's friends and by the enemies of Byron who were the friends of his wife; mysterious theories; exculpations; and the like. No such interest has been manifested in the domestic infelicities of any man save Nelson.

Medwin records his hero as saying that he proposed to his wife on a mad impulse, and she accepted him because he was the fashion. Lord Byron's friends declare it was her fortune that attracted him; and Leigh Hunt, who

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## *Byron and his Wife*

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could not conceive Byron playing any other rôle than that of a profligate where women were concerned, says we may take it for granted that Byron had never known anything of love but the animal passion. He certainly did not marry to be rid of Lady Caroline Lamb, or to satisfy the match-making proclivities of Lady Melbourne. Byron would never have retreated from an awkward situation in so cowardly a fashion, and his vanity would have forbidden the other alternative. His views of women and matrimony were frankly those of a cynic to whom there was nothing sacred in the subject. Like Burns, he had an amazing lack of reverence for women. The creations of his poems, his Medras, his Myrahs, and his Haidees were all cast in the same mould ; soft, voluptuous creatures, evanescent as sunbeams, and living in an atmosphere of love. Wherever he travelled, under the Spanish skies, on the coast of the Adriatic, in the Grecian Archipelago, or amongst the ruins of ancient Rome, he fashioned out of his fancy the same saccharine type of womanhood, a bundle of passions and vanities, to be cast aside at her lord's pleasure like a soiled glove. He hated an "esprit in petticoats," but he owned to admiring Madame de Staël, who declared that she would have given anything to have been in Lady Byron's place. He was flippant and profane over the realities of life ; marriage he considered to be an agreeable change, a new sensation to drive away the ennui from which he eternally suffered, but bringing with it few, if any, responsibilities, and imposing no restraints. Love, he argued, need not enter into the matter at all.

"If I love (he soliloquised in his journal at the time he

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## Byron and his Wife

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was looking out for a wife) I shall be jealous, and for that reason I will not be in love." Again, when Moore suggested marriage to him, Byron writes: "I can conceive nothing more delightful than such a state in the country, reading the country newspaper, etc., and kissing one's wife's maid." He is never serious. Women are a theme for a jest or a mark for his scorn. Yet in his perverse way he asked of Medwin, after the success of "*The Corsair*," "Don't we all write for them?" The melancholy and picturesque *poseur* became a hero and the fashion. Out of his poems impressionable females conjured up the ideal of their dreams—a mixture of beauty and chivalry. That was Byron's highest ambition. In spite of his contemptuous references to the sex, he was jealous of their admiration. He was always, as Leigh Hunt described him, "the lion of the perfumed locks," conscious of his Grecian beauty and wearing an aspect of picturesque melancholy. When he sat for his bust, and after it was finished, he remarked to the sculptor, "It is not like me; my expression is more unhappy"; and the artist who painted his picture declared that he looked as if he were thinking of a frontispiece for "*Childe Harold*." To Lord Sligo he avowed he would like to die of consumption so the ladies might say, "See that poor Byron, how interesting he looks in dying!"

It is, indeed, difficult to get at the heart of such a bundle of unrealities. When he became engaged to Miss Milbanke, he wrote that lady one or two letters marked by manliness and sincerity; but for the most part he was the same vain, wilful, and perverse creature he remained to the end. He tumbled into matrimony, as it were, by accident. Miss

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## *Byron and his Wife*

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Milbanke was a young lady of fortune and a recognised beauty, who moved in the same circle as Lady Caroline Lamb, without imitating that lady's follies and extravagances. Byron had been urged to marry—to quote the words of Moore—because marriage would be likely to prove “a timely refuge from those perplexities which form the sequel of all less regular ties.” Truly a remarkable reason, and taken in conjunction with the sentiments expressed on the subject by Byron himself, is there any cause for wonder that the marriage brought about exactly the opposite result? Miss Milbanke refused Byron's first offer, but agreed to maintain a correspondence with him. It was shortly after this that Byron observed in his Journal:—

“Yesterday a very pretty letter from Annabella, which I answered. What an odd situation and friendship is ours! Without one spark of love on either side, and produced by circumstances which in general lead to coldness on one side and aversion on the other. She is a very superior woman, and very little spoiled, which is strange in an heiress, a girl of twenty—a peeress that is to be in her own right—an only child and a savante, who has always had her own way. She is a poetess, a mathematician, a metaphysician, and yet withal very kind, and gentle with very little pretension. Any other head would be turned with half her acquisitions and a tenth part of her advantages.”

Now we come to that remarkable correspondence in which Byron freely and frankly wrote about himself and his own life. How far his real feelings were reflected in what he wrote, and to what extent they were tinged with that romantic melancholy he affected so much in his dealings with women, it is impossible to say. He confesses in one of his letters that he is “an awkward dissembler,” yet no



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## *Byron and his Wife*

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poet has given the world so much trouble in deciding what is false and what is genuine sentiment in his writings. In these letters he poses as a melancholy cynic, sick of men and women, and especially of poets, and continuing to exist only for some new sensation to fill the "craving void" which he feels in his heart. His cup has long been filled to the brim with bitterness, or the refusal of Lady Milbanke, "the one woman he preferred to all others," to become his wife might have made him miserable. How ingeniously he maintains that his own self-love has not been wounded by the rejection, and secures at the same time the sympathy of the lady, is shown by this extract :—

"I feel a kind of pride even in your rejection, more than I believe I could derive from the attachment of another, for it reminds me that once I thought myself worthy of the affection of almost the only one of your sex I ever truly respected."

Miss Milbanke was soon fascinated by the easy-going philosophy of the poet. He confessed to her that he was proud of any good deed he might have blundered into, simply because it proved that she had not heard him invariably spoken ill of.

At length he took it into his head to propose a second time, and was accepted. The cold and desultory method of his wooing, the haphazard fashion in which he finally put the question, and his strange behaviour before and after the ceremony constitute together one of the most amazing episodes in his remarkable career. I have said he slipped into matrimony by accident. On the 15th of September, 1814, he wrote to Moore: "To-morrow I shall know whether a circumstance of importance enough to

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## *Byron and his Wife*

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change many of my plans will occur or not." The "event of importance" was a marriage, but with whom it appears he had not decided. He discussed the question with a friend, who suggested a certain lady of fortune instead of Miss Milbanke. The friend drew up a proposal, which provoked a refusal. "You see," said Byron, "that after all Miss Milbanke is to be the person; I will write to her." Then, without more ado, Byron coolly drafted out his second letter of proposal, and passed it over to the friend. The story goes that the friend continued to expostulate until he picked up the letter and read it over. "Well really," he declared, "this is a very pretty letter. It is a pity it should not go; I never read a prettier one." "Then it shall go," answered Byron; and a question of such supreme importance to most young lovers was disposed of by a compliment.

A circumstance of some interest, as revealing Byron's attitude towards marriage, is that he had contracted two bets of one hundred guineas to one, and fifty guineas to one, that he would never marry. One of these bets was actually concluded the day before he despatched the letter of proposal, and to Medwin he afterwards confessed, "The day before I proposed to Lady Byron I had no idea of doing so."

During the eight months intervening between the acceptance and the marriage, Byron was writing flattering descriptions of his future wife to Moore and his friends, and making promise of reform to the lady herself. He hunted up the old letter of rejection from Miss Milbanke and thus commented on it:



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"In arranging papers I have found the first letter you ever wrote to me—read it again. You will allow mine appeared to be a very unpromising case, but I can forgive—that is not the word—I mean I can forget even the reality of your sentiments then, if you do not deceive yourself now. It was the epistle to which I have recurred which haunted me through all my future correspondence; and now farewell to it—and yet your friendship was dearer to me than any love but your own."

Byron was perfectly right. A more unpromising candidate for matrimony it would have been difficult to find. He was vain and impatient of control. He had seen the worst side of women from his youth upwards, and his love of intrigue had brought him into conflict even with the family of his fiancée. For the moment, however, he had been captivated by the cold beauty and simple unaffected nature of Miss Milbanke, and he was enthusiastic in her praises. He wrote to a lady of his acquaintance soon after the affair was settled: "She has no fault except being a great deal too good for me," and in letters to Moore we find frequent expressions of the same sentiments: "She is too good a person that—that—in short, I wish I was a better"; "My wife-elect is perfection and I hear of nothing but her merits and her wonders, and that she is very pretty"; "She is a kind of pattern in the North," and so on.

In his love-making with Miss Milbanke, Byron was no longer the dark and melancholy iconoclast, the perverse cynic upon whom, as Macaulay said, "the freshness of the heart ceased to fall like dew." He could write tender, human letters, with a biting wit, but inspired apparently by the deepest and the purest emotions. There are two

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## *Byron and his Wife*

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letters of this kind to which even the harshest critic of the poet will probably not deny the quality of manliness. "The truth is," he wrote to Miss Milbanke, "that could I have foreseen that your life was to be linked to mine—had I even possessed a distinct hope, however distant—I would have been a different and better being. As it is, I have sometimes doubts even if I should not disappoint the future nor act hereafter unworthily of you, whether the past ought not to make you still reject me, even that portion of it with which you are not unacquainted. I did not believe such a woman existed—at least for me—and I sometimes fear I ought to wish that she did not. I must turn from the subject."

Once more is the postscript in one of Lord Byron's letters the most significant part of it :—

"I have nothing to desire—nothing I would see altered in you, but so much in myself. I can conceive no misery equal to mine, if I failed in making you happy, and yet, how can I hope to do justice to those merits, for whose praise there is not a dissentient voice ? "

I know of nothing in the mass of Byron literature which tends in the least degree to support the theory that the poet's marriage was doomed to failure from the first—this is, of course, assuming that Byron redeemed his promises of reform. Two months after the event he wrote to Moore : "I think still one ought to marry upon lease, but am very sure I should renew mine at the expiration, though next term for ninety and nine years."

It was long afterwards, when the breach between himself and his wife had hopelessly widened, that Byron

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## *Byron and his Wife*

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related how a remarkable conjunction of ill-omens had served to emphasise the feeling in his own mind that the step he was taking was a rash and foolish one. The iron had entered into his soul when he told Medwin, amongst other foolish things, that Lady Byron never loved him, and married him because he was the fashion. The disenchantment was complete. He allowed his illusive fancy to play all manner of tricks with truth, and whilst much of what he said was inspired by momentary fits of ill-feeling against Lady Byron, there lay at the root of it all that vain love of glamour, of theatrical effect, which was such a marked weakness of his character.

We may pass over the numberless theories advanced both by the friends and the enemies of Byron to account for the rupture between the poet and his wife. Lady Byron does not come out of the ordeal very well. In spite of what she suffered at the hands of her husband, it is to be regretted that after his death she should have broken a silence preserved so proudly during his lifetime. On the whole Byron was fairly just to her after the separation. There is that explicit declaration to Moore that:—

“I don’t believe there was ever a better, or even a brighter, a kinder, or a more amiable and agreeable being than Lady B——. I never had, nor can have any reproach to make against her while with me. Where there is blame it belongs to myself, and if I cannot redeem it——”

and again to Rogers he wrote:—

“Will you have the goodness to say to me at once whether you ever heard me speak of her with disrespect, with unkindness, or

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## Byron and his Wife

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defend myself at her expense by any serious imputation of any description against her? Did you ever hear me say that when there was a right and a wrong she had the right?"

It is true that we have as a set-off to this vindication of Lady Byron, some half-dozen petulant and characteristically irresponsible rhymes in which the lady is held up to derision. For instance, we know that he endorsed the deed of separation:—

"A year ago, you swore, fond she,  
To love to honour, and so forth.  
Such was the vow you pledged to me,  
And here's exactly what its worth."

In the first Canto of "Don Juan," Lady Byron is clearly identified with Inez, who—

"Called some druggists and physicians,  
And tried to prove her loving lord was mad;  
But as he had some lucid intermissions,  
She next decided he was only bad."

These few examples of mischievous verse-making count for nought against the frank and spontaneous admission that Lady Byron was not to blame for the separation. It was when it appeared that reconciliation was hopeless that Byron the fatalist, the *poseur*, evolved a budget of superstitious fancies regarding his marriage which have been faithfully set down in Medwin's conversations.

Let us take them in order: (1) it had been predicted by Mrs. Williams, the gipsy, that twenty-seven was to be a dangerous age for the poet; (2) at the altar he trembled like a leaf, and made the wrong responses; (3) an ill-omen was the placing of a lady's maid between Byron and his

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## *Byron and his Wife*

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wife in the carriage which took them from the church ; (4) a horror of matrimony came over Byron at the wedding ; and (5) he gave Lady Byron a ring which belonged to his mother, who had married so ill. How many of these experiences are common to the average bridegroom it is needless to inquire ; that they should have been thought worthy of preservation in serious biography is ample proof of the interest aroused by every fragment of gossip about his unhappy affairs.



V

***BURNS : THE RUSTIC GALLANT***

“Love is a swallow  
    Flitting with spring :  
Though we would follow,  
Love is a swallow,  
All his vows hollow ;  
    Then let us sing,  
Love is a swallow  
    Flitting with spring.”

*Arthur Symons.*

“My lyre I tune, my voice I raise,  
And with my numbers mix my sighs ;  
And whilst I sing Euphelia's praise,  
I fix my soul on Cloe's eyes.

“Fair Cloe blush'd : Euphelia frown'd ;  
I sang and gazed ; I play'd, and trembled ;  
And Venus to the Loves around  
Remark'd how ill we all dissembled.”

*Matthew Prior.*

“I did but look and love a-while,  
'Twas but for one half-hour ;  
Then to resist I had no will,  
And now I have no power.”

*Thomas Otway.*



## *Burns : the Rustic Gallant*

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IT was Oliver Wendell Holmes who once said that every young poet was a lover to begin with. Robert Burns fulfilled this saying in its most literal sense. "For my own part," he wrote, "I never had the least thought or inclination of turning poet until I once got heartily in love, and then rhyme and song were, in the manner, the spontaneous language of my heart," or again, in reference to Nellie Fitzpatrick, "thus with me began love and poetry, which at all times have been my only, and till within the last twelve months, have been my highest enjoyment." Burns is not the first of the world's great poets whose finest songs are wrought in the language of love. Petrarch and Dante, Shakespeare and Pope, are names that stand out in the line of succession, and Cowley, in his preface to the "Mistress," declares that poets are scarcely thought freemen of their country without paying some duties or obliging themselves to be true to love.

Burns, before he had reached his twenty-sixth year, had flooded Ayrshire with love and poetry. But he was no theorist, who made love on paper. His passion was never simulated; he was "a very beadle to a humorous

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## *Burns : the Rustic Gallant*

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sigh," and he translated into his poems an intensity of feeling and an amorous exaltation which had had their counterpart in his own life.

Some of the finest, and by far the greatest quantity of his verse, was written in honour of that long roll of white rose and red rose loves, beginning with Nellie Fitzpatrick and ending with Jessie Lewars. Excepting for a brief period, he was, to quote his brother Gilbert's words, "constantly the victim of some fair enslaver"; and alas for the moralists, he loved not wisely but too well. Over and over again he set out, to employ his own phrase, "to batter himself into an affection." His muse would only respond on the inspiration of "a fine woman." His writings abound in proofs of this. "My heart," he confesses, "was completely tinder, and eternally lighted up by some goddess or other." "Woman," he said on another occasion, "is one of the finest pieces of Nature's workmanship"; and to Alexander Cunningham he declared, "Love is the Alpha and Omega of human enjoyment, all the pleasures, all the happiness of my humble compeers flow immediately and directly from this delicious source." Burns's philosophy of life is, in short, summed up in those lines from "Green Grow the Rashes":—

"What signifies the life o' man,  
An' 't wer na' for the lassies o'."

At eighteen Burns was the picturesque ballad-maker, the finest letter-writer and the first of Tarbolton gallants, the only man who wore tied hair, and a fille-mot plaid. He always dressed for the part of the lover. His coat and vest were Scotch tweed of the best, and he once boasted

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## *Burns : the Rustic Gallant*

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that he had two pair of breeks and stockings, and pumps, and five new shirts.

There was a time when he lamented his inability to make progress with the other sex. But after a term at the dancing-school and a little tuition from his fellows he became the most plausible amorist of them all. David Sillar was afterwards struck by Burns's "facility in addressing the fair sex," and adds that "many times when I have been bashfully anxious how to express myself, he would have entered into conversation with them with the greatest ease and freedom, and it was generally a deathblow to our conversation, however agreeable, to meet a female acquaintance." In fact, this rustic Lothario carried the lassies of Tarbolton off their feet with the same ease that he subsequently charmed the Duchess of Gordon and fascinated Clarinda. Where Burns threw his pocket-handkerchief, there were plenty of lassies ready and willing to pick it up. Once he set out on a conquest there were no half measures about him; he soared into the language of superlatives, the lady became a divinity without whose affection life became barren and grey.

What a task to run through the list of Burns's loves who were thus exalted to perfection and made peerless through the medium of his song! Ellison Begbie warmed his heart so that "every feeling of humanity, every principle of generosity, kindled in his breast"; handsome Nell had no rival, she was "the gust o' joy, the balm o' woe"; Chloris was "the peerless Queen of womankind"; and of Peggy Chalmers, he said her name was registered in his "heart's core." Burns had a handsome presence, a pretty wit,

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## *Burns : the Rustic Gallant*

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and a reckless and fascinating personality which bore down all opposition. He was never the lover who went on his knees. He wooed in a whirlwind of passion, and so infected the object of his desire that she drifted unconsciously into his arms. Sometimes there was a little resistance ; but the poet laid his siege so thoroughly that the lady's heart, to use his own words, usually "came down pop to his feet like Corporal Trim's hat."

This success was the result of long experience in the arts of courtship. In the idyllic days at Mount Oliphant, when he wooed Nellie Fitzpatrick and proposed to Ellison Begbie, he was the chaste and genuinely serious lover. Afterwards he made a sport and plaything of love and sank into a common gallant. What a delightful description he gives in his own autobiographical letter of his sweethearting in his father's harvest field ! No wonder that Clarinda wrote him years afterwards : "The description of your first love-scene delighted me." So it must delight any one who reads it.

The morals of the Scottish peasantry were not improved by the customs of courtship which prevailed at the time. The young farm-hands would travel many miles at the close of a hard day's work for the sake of an hour or two in the company of their sweethearts. As often as not, they sat out in the barn, or spent their time rambling along the banks of the Ayr. These meetings have been celebrated by Burns in many of his poems, including "The Rigs o' Barley" and "My Nanny O," in which occur the lines :—

"But I'll get my plaid an' out I'll steal,  
An' owre the hills to Nanny O."

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## *Burns : the Rustic Gallant*

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The "black books" of the Kirk furnish some evidence of the unhappy side of these rural courtships. Elizabeth Paton was one of the first partners of Burns in these philandering expeditions, and when she bore him a child, he wrote the famous welcome to it commencing:—

"Thou's welcome wean! Mishanter fa' me."

Whilst living at Tarbolton, Burns allowed his uncontrolled passions to have full sway, and it is the testimony of his brother Gilbert that "his agitation of mind and body exceeded anything of the kind in real life." If Burns had not been a consummate actor, and so fond of tearing a passion to tatters, it would be easier to believe that the anguish expressed in the letters he wrote after the trouble with Jean Armour was absolute proof of Gilbert's statement. But whenever Burns was crossed in love, he became the most miserable being on earth, and wrote letters to his friends so extravagantly pessimistic that they provoke laughter. This in his own words was the state of his mind when Mason Armour tore up the marriage contract between his daughter and the poet: "I reprobated the first moment of my existence, execrated Adam's folly, his infatuated wish for that goodly-looking but poisonous besetting gift which had ruined him and undone me, and called on the womb of uncreated night to close over me and all my sorrows." Burns here pictures his misery in April, 1786. Within a month of that time he was consoling himself with Highland Mary.

This is not an isolated instance of his inconstancy. When Clarinda returned to Europe, after visiting her hus-



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## *Burns : the Rustic Gallant*

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band in the West Indies, and Burns was then married to Jean, he wrote deploring himself as a "broken wretch," declaring that "ruined peace, wounded pride, and frantic disappointed passion" were among the ills of his life. He had always the same eternal cure for his passion-torn heart; he set out to seek a new love. Nobody must make the mistake of sympathising with Burns on the vicissitudes of his amorous career. He was born lusty and amorous. The glory of his existence lay in his eternal propensity for falling in love. Who can recall without a smile his concern during the Highland tour lest he had ruined this one source of happiness, and was in danger of falling a victim to a surfeit of passion. He composed a song on a writ served on him in respect of provision for May Cameron, by whom he had an illegitimate child. There was no hypocritical pretence of virtue about him. He went up to the Kirk and did penance for incontinency—and then repeated the offence. He knew his own shortcomings, and he tried honestly once or twice to be strictly moral, but the "damned star" wheeled about to the zenith, and it was all over with him. He often quotes that passage from Young:—

"On reason build resolve,  
That column of true majesty in man."

It occurs quite half a dozen times in his letters, and yet the man who knew so well the folly of his ways was to the end of his life tossed helplessly in a sea of passion.

VI

*THE STORY OF "BONNIE JEAN"  
AND OTHER MATTERS*

"O shade of Burns, if thou art looking on,  
If laughter visits the Plutonian shore,  
Then thou wilt laugh what Time for thee has won :  
Those easy virtues which the ' unco ' wore.

"Ah, no ! thy merit was not being good ;  
Thou Heaven didst hazard for a woman's e'e."

A. T.

"One woman is fair ; yet I am well : another is wise ; yet I am well : another virtuous ; yet I am well : but till all graces be in one woman, one woman shall not come in my grace. Rich she shall be, that's certain ; wise, or I'll none ; virtuous, or I'll cheapen her ; fair, or I'll never look on her ; mild, or come not near me ; noble, or not I for an angel ; of good discourse, an excellent musician, and her hair shall be of what colour it please God."

"*Much Ado about Nothing.*"



## VI

# *The Story of "Bonnie Jean" and Other Matters*

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A SIGNIFICANT fact about Burns's amours is that after three years crowned with courtships and intrigues he returned to his old love, Jean Armour. A good deal of doubt has been expressed as to whether this marriage really secured for Burns that happiness and tranquillity on which he had set his mind.

No man held loftier or more noble ideals concerning the wedded state. A good wife, he thought, was the panacea for all the ills that poetical flesh was heir to. One of his finest poems is, in fact, the apotheosis of domestic bliss. The "Cotter's Saturday Night" is now an imperishable fragment of the Scottish tongue, and the picture of the toil-worn peasant returning to his weans and wife stands for all time, the poetical idealisation of the sturdiest and most ennobling qualities in the Scotch peasant race.

Burns's own home life taught him to cherish this noble ideal of domestic happiness. The delightful influence of that home circle at Mount Oliphant was ever a sweet and abiding memory with him. William Burns was only known to speak a harsh word to his wife on one occasion, and the story of that devoted father imparting his little scraps of

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## *Story of "Bonnie Jean" and Other Matters*

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knowledge to Robert, and botanising in the hedge bottom with his little daughter, cannot be read without emotion. No wonder Burns wrote that "domestic bliss is the spark of celestial fire which lights up the wintry hut of poverty and makes the cheerless mansion warm, comfortable, and gay." Without it, he added, "life to the poor inmates of the cottage would be a damning gift."

Did Burns make a right choice? In the storm and stress of the three or four years that followed his proposal to Ellison Begbie, his first love, and a servant girl, Burns confessed that he had "a wishing eye to that inestimable blessing, a wife." At the Tarbolton Bachelors' Club, of which he was the first president, the eternal topic of marriage occupied the members at the opening meeting. The proposition for debate was thus set out: "Suppose a young man, bred a farmer, but without any fortune, has it in his power to marry either of two women, the one a girl of large fortune, but neither handsome in person nor agreeable in conversation, but who can manage the household affairs on a farm well enough; the other of them a girl very agreeable in person, conversation and behaviour but without any fortune, which of them should be choose?" The chairman's speech must have been worth listening to. A problem involving equal perplexities seriously engaged the attention of Burns a few years later when he had to choose between making an honest woman of Jean and dangle about Clarinda until that lady's husband was obliging enough to die.

She would have been a rare specimen of womankind who could make an ideal wife for Burns. Coleridge once

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## *Story of "Bonnie Jean" and Other Matters*

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said that the most happy marriage he could picture or imagine to himself would be the union of a deaf man to a blind woman ; but De Quincey slyly added that the poet would have quarrelled with any wife, though a Pandora sent down from Heaven to bless him. Propertius's mistress got drunk and threw cups at her lover's head. Browning loved his wife so passionately that when her father died the highest tribute he could pay to that excellent man's memory was to remark, "He was worthy of being Ba's father—out of the whole world only he so far as my experience goes."

Burns was a very fastidious lover, and he expected much from his wife. "The scale of good wifeship," he said, "I divide into ten parts—good nature four, good sense two, wit one, personal charms, namely, a sweet face, eloquent eyes, fine limbs, graceful carriage (I would add a fine waist, too, but that is soon spoilt), all these one." If Mrs. Burns was not endowed with these qualities in their various degrees, Burns's tributes, both in prose and verse, go to show that she made him an excellent wife.

Stevenson declared that Burns "was all his life on a voyage of discovery, but it does not appear conclusively that he ever touched the happy isle." So far as this observation is intended to support Stevenson's theory that Jean was all along in love with some one else, it may be dismissed as unworthy of consideration. It has been found necessary to defend the memory of Harriet against the aspersions of some of Shelley's biographers. Lady Byron did not escape the accusation of cruelty and indifference towards her husband. Jean, who bore with exem-

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## *Story of "Bonnie Jean" and Other Matters*

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plary patience the shortcomings of Burns, even to the extent of bringing up his illegitimate child, is arraigned on a charge of being unsympathetic and at heart unfaithful to her husband. There is not a shred of evidence to support such an accusation.

Mrs. Burns is no less a pathetic figure in the drama of Burns than Burns himself. With forced humour and an aching heart at the thought of her husband's incontinences, she is reported to have said, "Oor Robin should hae had twa wives." There must have been an intense belief in the God-given genius of her husband, amounting to nothing short of hero-worship, before, as a wife, Jean could view with quiet toleration the canonisation of Highland Mary. It is enough to recall the circumstances under which that beautiful poem, "To Mary in Heaven," was conceived. Burns was discovered by his wife lying on his back in an outhouse, his face lighted up with a glow of poetic inspiration, and his heart torn with anguish for the loss of his Highland divinity. She called him indoors twice, but he took no notice. When he did come in, he sat down and produced the poem to his dead Mary. It was true Burns bestowed his poetical favours equally on Jean, as instance the lines surely ardent enough for any wife :—

" It warms me, it charms me  
To mention but her name ;  
It heats me, it beats me  
And sets me a' on a flame."

But how many wives will bide a rival near the throne ? Highland Mary, shrouded in mystery as she is, was ever the cherished divinity of Burns's heart ; she absorbed the

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## Story of "*Bonnie Jean*" and Other Matters

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poetical side of him as completely as Dante's Beatrice. The recollection of her moved him to tears and poetry, and after his marriage, he wrote to Mr. Dunlop in a burst of passionate reminiscence: "There should I, with speechless agony of rapture, again recognise my lost, my dear Mary, whose bosom was fraught with truth, honour, constancy, and love."

After the lapse of a little more than one hundred years, it is no longer necessary to disguise the fact that the squalor and the moral guiltiness of Burns's life are inextricably bound up with the productions of his genius; that, in short, all these accumulated experiences in the fields of romance, these illicit courtships and intrigues, have been fused into his amorous poetry and are part of the man, inseparable, indissoluble. Let us have done with the current cant and accept no plaster-saint presentment of Burns. It is true that of late years one or two biographers, more bold than the rest, have politely declined to foster the tradition that Robert Burns was not half so black as he was painted. But for the most part, authors of lives of Burns—and they have been legion—may be said to have abused the attribute of charity almost to the point of absurdity. They have surrounded the poet with a halo of righteousness, and craved the reader to drop a silent tear on his tomb. This is reverent and touching. It may be the correct attitude at the graveside, but the centenary of Burns has been celebrated. Now the question is: Have we any right at all to apologise for genius? Poetical genius, at any rate, is mostly blind to the moralities. Shelley and Byron stand side by side with Burns as examples of



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## *Story of "Bonnie Jean" and Other Matters*

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poetic genius who ought to have been eternally shadowed by a moral policeman. But you must take your poets as you find them.

“Could this ill world hae been contrived  
To stand without mischievous woman,  
How peacefu’ bodies might hae lived  
Released frae a’ the arts sae common.”

Woman was the eternal magnet that drew the poetry out of Burns’s soul, that electrified that little bundle of appetites, ideas, and fancies. Can any one conceive the real Robbie Burns without Betty Paton, Jean Lorimer, Jean Armour, Highland Mary, the gay troop of peasant lassies who sent him off whistling and singing through the ploughed fields? Of course, Burns was something more than a passionate rhymist. To the Ayrshire peasant girls poetical incense could only be a shadowy and unsubstantial element in the commerce of love. He was a good-looking buck and his poems show that these lassies were fonder of kissing under “the milk white thorn” than posing as Cupid’s models for the jingles of a poet.

Burns threw a sonnet at every pretty girl he met. It was an incurable habit of his that remained with him to the end. When he was on his death-bed, Jessie Lewars was made the heroine of a poem. Wherever he might have been born, woman would have been his destiny. It is not necessary to deny the part which his hard and uncongenial environment played in the development of his moral character. He lived a hard life, in an atmosphere of grey, under just those conditions which were calculated to send a man of his temperament headlong to the

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## *Story of "Bonnie Jean" and Other Matters*

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devil so far as women were concerned. His early years were marked by the strictest continency. But when he took to dancing and rhyming, and first gave way to "a certain fashionable folly," his moral shipwreck became as certain as anything in this world could be. Ever afterwards woman was his eternal quest. His never-varying toast was the sex :—

"I like the jades for a' that,  
For a' that and a' that,  
An twice as muckle as a' that."

He was remarkably fond of servant-girls. His customary attitude towards his women was one of extreme condescension. The gay young ballad-maker reached down to their level and consented to love them. It was the testimony of his brother Gilbert that he was jealous of those in a higher social position than himself, and consequently his affections were rarely settled on people of that class.

He was, on his own confession, in the secrets of half the gallants in the parish of Tarbolton. When a fellow rustic, with a full heart and a halting pen, realised that the psychological moment had come, it was to Burns he turned for guidance in the composition of a proposal. The poet was no mean hand at a billet-doux. When a lad at school he fashioned his epistolary style on a collection of letters of the wits of Queen Anne's reign, which he picked up at a bookshop by the merest chance. There is something decidedly comic about the high-flown prose of some of Burns's own letters to his sweethearts. They are not warm and glowing with passion, breathing like his verse wholehearted slavish devotion to their object. They are

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more often stilted and formal declarations in which the metaphors run riot and the simplest propositions are lost in a labyrinth of words. We wonder, for example, what Miss Begbie thought of the following style of proposal:—

“ If you will be so good as to grant my wishes and it should please Providence to spare us the latest periods of life I can look forward and see that even then though bent down with wrinkled age, even then when other worldly circumstances will be different to me, I will regard my E—— with the tenderest affection ; and for this plain reason, because she is still possessed of those noble qualities, improved to a much higher degree, which first inspired my affection for her.”

This is Burns's youthful version in Johnsonian prose of that exquisite poem “ John Anderson, my Jo.”

The unhappy influence of the polite letter-writer always remained with the poet, and the famous pastoral of Sylvander and Clarinda subsequently produced a batch of love-letters which are unique examples of pomposity.

When he left the belles of Tarbolton, he paid his court to a Lothian farmer's daughter, “ whom I have almost persuaded to accompany me to the West country.” He started a “ chaise ” after a certain Edinburgh belle to whom he talked sentiment and whose hand he squeezed. At Carlisle a girl tried to drag him to Gretna Green, but he was not a “ gull.” It is the same right through the story. We might conciliate the lovers of a plaster-saint Burns by merely saying that these incidents are recalled only by way of showing that Burns himself thought them indispensable to the education of a poet. Whenever he met a pretty woman, he wrote a poem. Sometimes he also broke a commandment, but that's part of the bargain.



VII

*THE LOVE STORY OF KEATS*

"I, forsooth in love! I, that have been love's whip!

. . . . .

Go to; it is a plague  
That Cupid will impose for my neglect  
Of his almighty dreadful little might.  
Well, I will love, write, sigh, pray, sue, groan."

*"Love's Labour's Lost."*

"When first we met, we did not guess  
That Love would prove so hard a master;  
Of more than common friendliness  
When first we met we did not guess.  
Who could foretell the sore distress,  
This irretrievable disaster,  
When first we met?—we did not guess  
That Love would prove so hard a master."

*Robert Bridges.*

## VII

### *The Love Story of Keats*

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ONE of the best remembered passages of Richard Monckton Milnes's discerning and sympathetic life of John Keats embodies the chief events which relate to the development and the ending of a strangely pathetic love story. In the fifty years or so which have elapsed since the biographer wrote that the young poet's life had been notable for "the publication of some small volumes of verse, some earnest friendships, one profound passion and a premature death" a good deal of material has come to light, including that famous volume of love-letters which tends to connect indissolubly the last two incidents of the four. How far the feverish jealousy, the mental unrest and worry of the one grand passion of the poet's life, hastened his death, it is of course impossible for any one to say. That it was one of the chief contributory causes seems beyond the shadow of a doubt.

The publication of these letters dissipates for ever the belief of Shelley that Keats's death was indirectly due to the scurrilous attacks on his poetical reputation. The legend which led to the writing of "Adonais," and caused Lord Byron tardily to recant his ill-natured diatribes,

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## *The Love Story of Keats*

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is still very much alive. But it is nothing more than a legend. Keats, as Byron said, was not the man "to be snuffed out by an article," and only the picturesqueness of the suggestion has enabled it to survive and be accepted as gospel truth for so long. "Praise or blame," wrote Keats to his publisher, "has but a momentary effect on the man whose love of beauty in the abstract makes him a severe critic of his own works." Keats knew well enough that it is the fate of nearly every great poet to receive a baptism of adverse criticism, oftentimes seasoned to the popular taste with a touch of the scurrility and personal abuse which characterised the attacks made on "Endymion." Shelley, and Byron, and Wordsworth, and later Tennyson, all passed through the same ordeal.

Although the latter part of Keats's life was rendered miserable by the effects of a consuming passion, he did not, like some of his greatest contemporary singers, discover the road to poetry through the tortuous paths of love. But in one of his earliest poems, reflecting on the misery of disappointed passion, it is to the Muse he turns for solace:—

"Should e'er unhappy love my bosom pain  
From cruel parents or relentless fair;  
O let me think it is not quite in vain  
To sigh our sonnets to the mid-night air.  
Sweet hope! Ethereal balm upon me shed,  
And wave thy silver pinions o'er my head."

Until he met the woman who was to destroy his peace of mind and to stretch him on a rack of roses, Keats had a fair share of that boyish sensitiveness that interprets as a sign of weakness any soft advances of man to-

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## *The Love Story of Keats*

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wards woman. There was about the juvenile Keats nothing of the sentimentality, the lascivious softness of Shelley, or the precocious gallantry of Byron; and later on, when he met his fate in Fanny Brawne, he was, outside his letters, shy and awkward and extremely reserved. There are no sonnets extolling the beauty of his mistress's eyebrows. Severn, the devoted friend who nursed him through his fatal illness, declared, in answer to a question as to whether Keats ever referred to "the cankerworm which was eating away his heart," replied, "not a word ever passed his lips."

Keats was not fitted for the rôle of lover. He had none of the longings of Burns for an ideal partner through life. His whole attitude to the sex was one of open hostility, and when it was fulfilled that a woman should enslave him, the young scoffer went down, as it were, with his anti-matrimonial banners flying. He protested to the last against the thralldom of love and passion, and yet remained as weak as water and was obedient to and grateful for a look or a written word from his mistress. In July, 1818, he writes to Bailey from Inverary:—

"I have not the right feeling towards women—at this moment I am striving to be just to them, but I cannot. It is because they fall so far beneath my boyish imagination. When I was a school-boy I thought a fair woman a pure goddess; my mind was a soft nest in which some one of them slept, though she knew not. I have no right to expect more than their reality. I thought them ethereal, above men. I find them perhaps equal. . . . I do not like to think insults in a lady's company. I commit a crime with her which absence would not have known. It is not extraordinary when among men I have no evil thoughts, no malice, no spleen. I feel free to speak or to be silent; I can listen, and from every one I

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## *The Love Story of Keats*

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can learn ; my hands are in my pockets ; I am free from all suspicion and comfortable. When I am among women, I have evil thoughts, malice, spleen ; I cannot speak or be silent ; I am full of suspicions, and therefore listen to nothing. I am in a hurry to be gone."

More than this he is not content with expressing his aversion to women, but goes the length of laughing in the faces of those who have been attracted by their charms. He sees humour in the miserable plight of a love-sick Lothario. "Even," he says, "when I know a poor fool to be really in pain about it, I could burst out laughing in his face."

It is a curious commentary on this attitude of studied contempt for women that the voice of the scoffer should ring out in poems that are full of the luxury of passion and the most exaggerated sentiment. Perhaps it may be argued that a poet who knows his trade has no need to reflect his own thoughts and feelings in what he writes. The real views of Keats, however, are to be discovered over and over again in his poems and letters. He always chooses to regard earthly love and the search after ideal beauty as manifested in poetry, as antagonistic forces. In his letters he declares repeatedly that a passion for women can only distract and harass the man who is to be a poet. "I equally dislike," he says, "the favour of the public with the love of a woman. They are both a cloying treacle on the wings of independence."

How different it was both with Burns and Byron. Passion with them was the spring of poesy, and the first promptings of genius were inspired by the freshness and beauty of a



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## *The Love Story of Keats*

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youthful romance into which had entered all the glow and colour of life.

The circumstances of Keats's meeting with the lady who was to exercise such tragic influence on the last three years of his life are well known. He had just lost one brother by the disease which was afterwards to strike him down. Another one was in America. His friend, Mr. Armitage Brown, invited the poet to join him at Wentworth Place, where they had for their next door neighbour Mrs. Brawne, the widow of a gentleman of means, who lived with her daughter Fanny, and two other children. The only record of the poet's meeting with Miss Brawne is contained in a letter written to his brother towards the end of December, 1818. The value of observing exactly the dates of this story will be obvious in a moment; and if any justification were required for printing the letter in full, it is to be found in the remarkable, and somewhat ungallant freedom, with which the writer discusses the physical attributes of his new acquaintance :—

“ Perhaps as you are fond of giving me sketches of characters, you may like a little picnic of scandal even across the Atlantic. Shall I give you Miss Brawne? She is about my height, with a fine style of countenance of the lengthened sort; she wants sentiment in every feature; she manages to make her hair look well; her nostrils are very fine, though a little painful; her mouth is bad and good; her profile is better than her full face, which indeed is not full, but pale and thin without showing any bone; her shape is very graceful and so are her movements; her arms are good, her hands badish, her feet tolerable.

“ She is not seventeen, but she is ignorant; monstrous in her behaviour, flying out in all directions, calling people such names that I was forced lately to make use of the term—minx; this is, I think, from no innate vice, but from a penchant she has for acting

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## *The Love Story of Keats*

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stylishly. I am, however, tired of such style, and shall decline any more of it. She had a friend to visit her lately. You have known plenty such. She plays the music, but without one sensation but the feel of the ivory at her fingers. She is a downright miss without one set-off. We hated her, and smoked her, and bated her, and I think drove her away. Miss Brawne thinks her a paragon of fashion, and says she is the only woman in the world she would change persons with. What a stupe! She is as superior as a rose to a dandelion."

Thus, after cataloguing the lady's virtues and defects with a cruel impartiality that would have eternally estranged her could she have read this letter, Keats allows her some attractive qualities by comparison. But one cannot be expected to write the lady down beautiful on the strength of this description. And the silhouette which is to be found in one or two editions of the poet's works does not assist us out of the difficulty. But silhouettes are inadequate. Mr. Rossetti, who seems to have studied this picture attentively, says it shows "a very profuse mass of hair, a tall, rather sloping forehead, a long and prominent aquiline nose, a mouth and chin of the petite kind, a very well-developed throat, and a figure somewhat small in proportion to the head." This is at least more charitable, and certainly more helpful and informing, than a description which speaks of "a fine style of countenance of the lengthened sort." It is stated also that Miss Brawne had blue eyes, which were doubtless an additional attraction to a poet who once wrote:—

"Blue! 'Tis the life of heaven—the domain  
Of Cynthia—the wide palace of the sun."

At a riper stage of the acquaintance, when it does not



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## *The Love Story of Keats*

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appear the lady is at all in a mood to respond to his passion, the poet drops the critical habit and declares himself lost in "swooning admiration of your beauty." But we are not at all certain that when Keats wrote the pitiless description just quoted, he was not all the time in love with her, and the letter was merely by way of concealing the fact.

Let us see. Keats became formally engaged to Miss Brawne between December, 1818, and the following summer, and in August, 1819, in the very flood tide of his passion, he wrote to Mr. Taylor:—

"I feel every confidence that if I choose, I may be a popular writer. That I will never be; but for all that I will get a livelihood. I equally dislike the favour of the public with the love of woman."

At this time, too, he attributes the slow sale of his book to the offence the ladies have taken at him and admits that they are partly justified by the tendency he displays in his poems to class them "with roses and sweetmeats—they never see themselves dominant." It is true that Keats's women are never real creatures of flesh and blood who love and hate passionately. They are as unlike the soft voluptuous gazelles of Byron and the strapping buxom lassies who lighted up the imagination of Burns, as the meek Tennysonian maidens are unlike the athletic heroines of modern fiction. They are soft ethereal beings who are lost in an atmosphere of splendid imagery; and we regard them merely as spectacular accessories to the music of the song.



VIII

*A BATCH OF TOUCHING LOVE  
LETTERS*

"My letters! all dead paper, . . . mute and white!—  
And yet they seem alive and quivering  
Against my tremulous hands."

*Elizabeth Barrett Browning.*

"Well, I never saw such a letter in my life—so saucy, so journalish, so sanguine, so pretending, so everything . . . yet you are an impudent slut to be so positive."

*Dean Swift to Stella.*

## VIII

### *A Batch of Touching Love Letters*

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**T**HE little volume of love letters in which is told the story of Keats's overmastering passion for Fanny Brawne must be numbered amongst the most pathetic things in the whole range of English literature. It is surely one of life's bitterest ironies that the poet who ridiculed love as a childish and effeminate weakness should have become enraptured to the point of distraction when he required all his strength to fight for life.

As I have said already, the attitude of Keats towards women was one of conscious superiority bordering on contempt. Yet, when the barbed dart was pointed at him, down he came, as Burns would say, "Pop! Like Corporal Trim's hat." In a glowing letter to his brother George in America, Keats declared that:—

"the roaring of the wind is my wife and the stars through the window panes are my children. The mighty abstract idea of beauty in all things that I have, stifles the more divided and minute domestic happiness."

The poet had resolved to sacrifice everything to his art. His youthful dreams, like the dreams of Shelley, with whom he had so much in common, were of a mighty fame to be won by touching the heart of the whole world and

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## *A Batch of Touching Love Letters*

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not flattering that of one woman. This was always his attitude when he could think sanely. At the beginnings of that burning passion which probably helped to destroy his life and certainly left him bereft of all peace of mind, he foresaw with prophetic instinct the inevitable tragedy and longed to shake himself free again. But he was hopelessly, irretrievably entangled—a glimpse of the woman he loved left him blind to everything else in the universe. There is a despairing cry in one of the earlier letters of the series :—

“ Ask yourself, my love, whether you are not very cruel to have so entrammelled me, so destroyed my freedom.”

This is not an idle lover's jest. It is a reproach penned in all sincerity and in an agony of bitterness at the thought of that sacrifice of peace of mind and freedom from mental worry that are necessary to any great creative achievement. The poem of “*Lamia*” composed at this time represents a struggle between a consuming passion and philosophy ; and the position of the poet, almost identical as it is, recalls to the mind the words of Shakespeare's *Biron* :—

“ And I forsooth in love ! I that  
Have been love's whip,  
A very beadle to a humorous sigh.

Regent of love rhymes, lord of folded arms,  
The anointed sovereign of sighs and groans.”

The sense of exasperation awakened in Keats by the knowledge of his impotence in the face of this grand passion is responsible for a good deal of the waywardness, the selfishness, and the note of querulousness which runs through his letters. In endeavouring to judge the char-

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## *A Batch of Touching Love Letters*

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acter of Keats from these letters one must not forget to make allowances for the desperate lot of the writer. Hereditary disease had stricken him down at the moment of intellectual adolescence. He was filled with big schemes to give the world something which would make secure for posterity that position which, in spite of the venom of critics like Byron, he felt he had won amongst the poets. As yet he had done no more than taste the sweetness of poesy. He was beginning to realise in himself those potentialities of greatness which provoked the cry :—

“ O for ten years that I might overwhelm myself in poesy ! ”

It was heartbreaking for him to reflect that he was thus being dragged helplessly from a task which partook in some degree of the nature of a vindication. We cannot be very tolerant with those who critically analyse these love letters, and end by putting the poet on his trial as a selfish egotist. But, apart from any light they may throw on the personal character and disposition of the poet, as the literary expression of a profound passion, these letters are perhaps unrivalled. The spirit of real poetry permeates them. There is to be found everywhere a richness, a daintiness, a rare command of striking beautiful images, such as one comes across nowhere outside the greatest poetry. I do not know any volume of letters in the English language to surpass them.

There have been many beautiful love-letters written by poets. Burns's letters in the course of his philanderings with Mrs. M'Lehose, although marred by much foolish and rhapsodical nonsense, are studded with exquisite phrases.



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## *A Batch of Touching Love Letters*

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Byron, at the time he was flaunting his gallantries in the face of Europe, left lying in an Italian garden on the page of a chance novel, a charming epistle which for ever united him to the one woman who was capable of stirring in him a deep and lasting affection. But the letters of Keats are permeated with a beauty altogether distinct—the beauty of pathos. They cannot be read without pain, and it is sometimes painful even to write about them. The agony of some of the latest in the volume almost makes one wish with Mr. Sydney Colvin that they had never been laid bare to the curious eye of the world.

In defence of those who gave to the world this poignant volume, it may be said that Keats himself probably foresaw that if he was amongst the great poets, as he prophesied he would be, even the record of this single passion might be read by strange eyes. Every line in the most pathetic letter is written with the unerring hand of the poet. His passion never overcame him so that he slurred the artistry of his work, or failed to seize the inspired word. He had a keen intellectual joy even in this tormenting operation. "What would Rousseau have said had he seen our little correspondence?" he asked of Miss Brawne. "What would his ladies have said? I don't care much. I would sooner have Shakespeare's opinion about the matter." Shakespeare was always the final court of appeal with Keats. "I never quite despair," he said to Haydon, "if I read Shakespeare," and to Reynolds, "Say a word or two on some passages in Shakespeare that may have come rather new to you, which must be continually happening, notwithstanding that we read the same play forty times."

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## *A Batch of Touching Love Letters*

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May we then not assume that Keats would hardly have speculated thus about his letters becoming public unless he perceived the possibility of such an event, and moreover had the letters not been of his best would he even jestingly have dared to indulge the idea of Shakespeare sitting in judgment on them? There is, by the way, another sidelight bearing on this controversy. It is forthcoming in one of the letters:—

“I have nothing particular to say to-day,” Keats writes to Miss Brawne, “but not intending that there should be any interruption to our correspondence (which at some future time I propose offering to Murray), I write something.”

But there is no need to pursue these speculations any further. When the poet rejoices that Miss Brawne can love him without being “letter-written and sentimentalised into it” (after the Rousseau fashion), he forgets that his own letters are about as sentimental as they well can be, and indeed resolve themselves into the most passionate outpourings of a love-sick heart. Miss Brawne was not affected in the least by the fine poetical imagery and the beauty of diction in which she was addressed. This fact strangely enough lent added strength to the sincerity of Keats’s belief that the lady loved him fondly. As he could not be loved for his poetry by one who had no appreciation of poetry, therefore he argued he must be loved for himself alone; and the simple thought was delicious to him. In one place, he says:—

“I cannot conceive any beginning of such love as I have for you, save Beauty. There may be a sort of love for which, without the least sneer at it, I have the highest respect, and can admire in others, but it has not the richness, the bloom, the full form, the enchantment

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## *A Batch of Touching Love Letters*

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of love after my own heart. So let me speak of your beauty, though to my own endangering, if you could be so cruel as to try elsewhere its power. . . . I love you more in that I believe you have liked me for my own sake, and for nothing else. I have met with women whom I really think would like to be married to a Poem, and to be given away by a Novel."

We recall that Byron in less happy language accused Miss Milbanke of having married him out of sheer vanity because he was a poet.

Those who study these letters carefully in the light of the author's poems will be struck by a remarkable similarity at many points. Strange as it is that the man who laughed at love should have become its devoted slave, it is perhaps stranger still that the author of "Endymion's Pilgrimage" should in his own person experience the same heart-sickness and be devoured by the same vain and morbid imaginings as the youthful hero in quest of his ideal love. There are passages in "Endymion" full of prophetic significance; and, what is more, the hysterical and impassioned style of that poem is reflected in Keats's wooing. Take the cry against Fanny Brawne, whom Keats charges with "destroying his freedom," and compare it with the explanation of Endymion:—

"Woe, alas!

That love should ever be my bane."

And Peona's remonstrance to her brother:—

"Is this the cause!

This all! Yet it is strange and sad, alas!

That one who through this middle earth should pass

Most like a journeying demi-god, and leave

His name upon the harp-string, should achieve

No higher bard than single maidenhood."

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## *A Batch of Touching Love Letters*

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Again, two more extracts may be quoted :—

“ My passion grew  
The more I saw her dainty hue  
Gleam delicately thro’ the azure clear  
Until ’twas too fierce agony to bear.”

Then he wrote in one of his letters :—

“ Even when I am thinking of you, I receive your influence and a tenderer nature stealing upon me. All my thoughts, my unhappiest days and nights, have, I find, not at all cured me of my love of beauty, but made it so intense that I am miserable that you are not with me, or rather breathe in that one sort of patience that cannot be called life.”

The hopelessness of the attachment was evident from the first meeting. Keats had received his death warrant on that night when he spat arterial blood on the bed sheets. But the thought of Fanny Brawne created a new desire for life. That is the note that runs through the first and the cheeriest of his letters.

The poet never enjoyed a moment’s happiness unless he was by his mistress’s side. The bitter thought that he might die without claiming her for his own nearly drove him mad with grief. “ I can bear to die,” he wrote, in anguish to his friend Brown. “ I cannot bear to leave her. Oh, God ! God ! Oh, God ! ” Everything about him that conjured up thoughts of her added fuel to the fire. She was always present to his mind. Fanny Brawne was to him what Cynthia was to Endymion ; she kept him awake “ o’ nights as a tune of Mozart’s might do.” She was an imperial woman, whose very “ yes ” or “ no ” was to him a bouquet. He wished for death, as he said, every

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## *A Batch of Touching Love Letters*

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night, but dreaded it because it would take him away from her. He could not conceive that there had ever been such love as his in the world. "All I can bring to you," he wrote in a passionate adoration, "is swooning admiration of your beauty." "I wish," he says, in another letter, "that I were in your arms full of faith, or that a thunderbolt would strike me. God bless you !"

IX

*SHELLEY AS THE AMORIST*

"Love he comes, and Love he tarries,  
Just as fate or fancy carries;  
Longest stays, when sorest chidden;  
Laughs and flies, when press'd and bidden.

. . . . .  
Love's a fire that needs renewal  
Of fresh beauty for its fuel;  
Love's wing moults when caged and captured,  
Only free, he soars enraptured."

*Thomas Campbell.*

"Thou shalt not die; for while love's fire shines  
Upon his altar, men shall read thy lines."

*Herrick.*



## IX

### *Shelley as the Amorist*

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IT is often the fashion among those who are the most curious to study the heart of man where the heart of woman is concerned, to be strangely indignant at the sight of another man's printed love letter. They sternly reprobate the publication of such things to the world. "Let's have no more chatter about Harriet"—that is almost a commonplace of Shelleyian criticism. It was only a few years ago that a big bundle of Shelley's love letters were put up for auction in a London sale room and sold to the highest bidder. That, one may grant, is an indignity which might have been spared the poet, but if we are going to tell the stories of great men, we must also tell the stories of their great romances. And Shelley lived in an atmosphere of romance.

It has been written that Shelley proved himself a profligate only in a lesser degree than Byron. The story of Shelley's relations with his women is certainly not an edifying one. There never lived, I suppose, a man more changeable and uncertain in his affections; and it is doubtful whether after all his voyages in quest of an ideal partner he ever arrived safely in port. From the moment he was jilted by his cousin, Harriet Grove, until he began

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## *Shelley as the Amorist*

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to tire of his second wife, Mary, in that lonely Italian villa to which they retired, he was ever in quest of a perfect partner. No woman ever existed who for any sustained period could reasonably satisfy his idealised conception of female excellence. He worshipped his idols for a brief period, and then smashed them up remorselessly. It is a curious fact in relation to the chequered love stories of two of the greatest poets of the last hundred years that they should have passed in almost identical words a passionate eulogy on love, and more curious still in the light of the cruel pains and penalties in which it involved them both.

When, at eighteen, Shelley was rhapsodising over his first love and faithless cousin, Harriet Grove, he wrote to the hero-worshipping Hogg, afterwards his faithful biographer :—

“What, then, shall happiness arise from? Can we hesitate—Love, dear love. And though every faculty is bewildered by the agony which in this life is its too constant attendant, still is not that very agony to be preferred to the most thrilling sensualities of epicurism?”

This sort of writing is of the essence of poetic madness, and no doubt the rather practical and fancy-free Hogg laughed in his sleeve at the severity of his friend's attack. Robert Burns, poet and amorist, has expressed himself in much the same rhapsodical style. Thirty years before, he had apostrophised love in his grand, exuberant manner in his common-place book, adding :—

“If anything on earth deserves the name of rapture, it is the feelings of green eighteen in the company of the mistress of his heart.”

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## *Shelley as the Amorist*

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The fact that there is to be discovered also in the history of Byron, and again in that of Keats, the same exultant declarations, and that singularly enough a mad passion should have brought tragedy into all their lives, is at least a remarkable coincidence. So far as Shelley is concerned it has been decreed by a host of biographers that the resplendent light of his genius and his passionate devotion to freedom and humanity should be counted as sufficient reparation for the darker episodes of a rebellious and undisciplined life. If this theory is accepted, we ought in common fairness to grant a dispensation to all geniuses who have laughed at morality and defied the proprieties. How it comes about that in spite of a fulness of knowledge concerning Shelley's life, the world at large has chosen to look upon him with a lenient eye, whilst it lashes Byron and whispers reproachfully of Burns, has never been rationally explained.

Shelley's attachments to the other sex were never of long duration, and the vigour with which he repudiated them afterwards was, one exception always remaining, in exact proportion to the enthusiasm and zeal shown in their cultivation. More consistent apostacy in love was never seen. Of Harriet Shelley, after their marriage, he wrote :—

“ Let death all mortal ties dissolve,  
But ours shall not be mortal.”

And yet within three years, he declared to Peacock :—

“ The partner of my life should be one who can feel poetry and understand philosophy. Harriet is a noble animal, but she can do neither.”

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## *Shelley as the Amorist*

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To Miss Hitchener, schoolmistress, Deist, and Republican—soul-partner and the rest, he declared :—

“ Never shall that intercourse cease which has been the day dream of my existence, the sun which has shed warmth on the cold drear length of the anticipated prospect of my life.”

After he had lived in close proximity to the lady for the short space of one year, the sun goes down, and he dismisses her from his household with this eloquent comment :—

“ My astonishment at my own fatuity, inconsistency, and bad taste was never so great as after living for four months with her as an inmate. What would Hell be were such a woman in Heaven ? ”

The same fate waited upon Emilia Vivania, the picturesque lady-nun of Pisa, to whom the “ *Epipsychidion* ” is dedicated in lines of glowing admiration :—

“ Emily, I love thee—tho’ the world by no thin name  
Will hide that love from its unvalued shame.”

The association of this lady with the poem robbed the poet for once of the rare joy of reading his own composition. “ *The Epipsychidion*,” he said, “ I cannot look at. The person whom it celebrates was a cloud instead of a Juno ; and poor Ixion starts from the Centaur that was the offspring of his own embrace ! ”

The man who could root out both love and friendship in such amazingly quick time was hardly likely to waste any vain regrets over broken hearts or disappointed affections. Hogg, the Boswellian attorney, whose unfinished life of the poet is so unconsciously amusing, relates how

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## *Shelley as the Amorist*

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in the period immediately before they were both expelled from Oxford, Shelley, like his own Prince Athanase, was always yearning to meet the ideal partner of his poetical imagination. He found in the writing of some wildly rhapsodical and exceedingly foolish romances a safety valve for the flood of sentimentality which possessed him. In "Zastrozzi," and other stories of the same type, he holds up the mirror to his own unhealthy mind. A note of wild tumultuous passion runs through them all. The heroines are creatures impossible out of Bedlam. These books were all written to aid that insane propaganda against the institution of marriage which he always attacked with such strange ferocity, little dreaming that the tragedy of his own life was to demonstrate the futility of the free-love doctrine.

Sir Timothy Shelley, the poet's father, tried to reform his son by the common-place device of a suitable marriage; and the unpoetical Hogg promptly entered into the spirit of the thing. It was perhaps fortunate for Hogg's friendship for Shelley that the latter did not hear the pair plotting over their wine to marry him off comfortably. "Tell me," said the father, "what do you think I ought to do with my poor boy? He is rather wild, is he not? If he had married his cousin he would perhaps have been less so. He would have been steadier!" Hogg replied, "He wants somebody to take care of him—a good wife. What if he were married?" "But how can I do that? It is impossible," continued Sir Timothy, with a fine knowledge of his son. "If I were to write and tell Bysshe to marry a girl he would refuse directly. I am sure he would, I



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## *Shelley as the Amorist*

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know him well." Hogg smiled at the old gentleman's simplicity, and suggested that the poet should be brought into contact with a few suitable young ladies. Although a list of candidates was actually drawn up by Sir Timothy, nothing more was heard of the matter.

Byron has shown that there is nothing half so fascinating to impressionable femininity as the spectacle of picturesque genius fighting the fates. Shelley, it must not be forgotten, was, according to Hogg, "pre-eminently a lady's man"; his childish beauty and picturesqueness, not less than his aristocratic birth, and the fact that he had been outlawed for his opinions, attracted the sympathy of the fair sex, and that being so no wonder, then, he captured the heart of Harriet Westbrook, to whom he wrote many glowing letters. The causes which led up to the parting and the tragedy that followed it have been discussed very often, and are likely to be discussed again.

Shelley has been fortunate in escaping a gibbeting such as Henley gave Burns. It has been the fashion for hero-worshipping biographers, from Professor Dowden downwards, to string together half-a-dozen trivial points of difference between Shelley and his wife and serve them up as evidence that the union of the pair was marred by a lack of sympathetic toleration and a total disregard on the part of Harriet for the prejudices and sensibilities of this "eternal child of poetry." According to their view of the question the heroine of Shelley's story was not the happy young schoolgirl whose "dear love gleamed upon the gloomy path" of the poet before he became famous—the girl who worked diligently at her Latin in order to be

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## *Shelley as the Amorist*

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intellectually worthy of him, and whom he deserted for reasons which can never, to any impartial mind, appear in the least degree adequate. That honour is reserved for Mary Wollstonecraft, the daughter of Godwin, who after living with Shelley as long as Harriet was alive, promptly claimed the shelter of the marriage laws she had so often derided directly that unhappy creature had ended her own life.

The last chapter in the tragic and chequered life of Shelley is the brightest, and, in spite of the occasional clouds, the best. I have alluded to Shelley's letters. Those to Mary will bear reading by persons of critical taste. They are not marked by the grand eloquence and the sweeping rhetoric of Burns, the studied melodrama of Byron, the dignity and grace of Pope, or the prettiness of Swift; they have nothing to do with art, for they were conceived in moments of suffering and privation when the temptation to sacrifice truth and sincerity to passion or fancy could not exist. But they appeal to the heart and are of the essence of poetry.





X

*CONCERNING SOME FAMOUS LOVE  
LETTERS*

“ I will drop in his way some obscure epistles of love ; wherein, by the colour of his beard, the shape of his leg, the manner of his gait, the expressure of his eye, forehead, and complexion, he shall find himself most feelingly personated.”

*“ Twelfth Night.”*

“ Heaven first sent letters for some wretch’s aid—  
Some banish’d lover or some captive maid ;  
They live, they speak, they breathe what love inspires,  
Warm from the soul, and faithful to its fires.”

*Pope.*

## *Concerning some Famous Love Letters*

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IT is said that the first letter ever composed was the production of Atossa, a Persian Empress; and having regard to the sex of the writer, the chances are that it was to a man, and that man a lover. Love letters are the common attribute of every romance. How many women are there to whom a little faded packet of papers, hidden away in the innermost recesses of a private closet, is all that remains of a grand passion, now rose-coloured and idealised through the mist of the years? Love letters have been the same in all ages. Their form and style may change with the caprices of fashion, but their appeal is unchangeable, eternal. They are from one man to one woman. They are illogical, dogmatic, fearless, egotistical; and sometimes their note of selfish complacency strikes a third party as an indecent outrage on the rest of the world. But they are nearly always sincere, and therefore they have a certain value in the revelation of character. Rousseau, who is entitled to be heard with respect on this subject, once said that to write a good love letter "we must begin without knowing what we mean to say and finish without knowing what we have written." There is no need to limit the application of this remark to

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## *Concerning some Famous Love Letters*

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the making of love letters. A note of spontaneity and any absence of all the subtleties of calculated art are the special and distinguishing characteristics of epistolary excellence in all its forms. But in respect to what Gibbon has called "letters of the heart," those glowing effusions which have nothing to do with the head, and reflect only the passions and feelings of the moment, studied expressions and ambitious literary effects are wholly unconvincing. We know, of course, that the vanity of human nature is such that the ardent lover invariably sets out with the idea of creating an impression through his letters; and to that end he burns the midnight oil and lets loose a flood of rhapsodical fustian. Burns, who rather prided himself on his skill as a letter-writer, and used to act in that capacity for many an uninspired Ayrshire lad, plagued "Clarinda" with some of the most extravagant rhetoric that was ever conceived in the brain of a love-sick poet. That there are elegant love letters, the product of elaborate care and full of literary beauties, is undeniable. Lady Mary Wortley Montagu's correspondence with her husband will instantly recur to the mind. But we must never forget that this remarkable woman was in a sense abnormal and exempt from any trace of sentimentality, and that on no occasion did she ever allow her passions to outrun her pen. As a result, none of her writings can fairly be termed love letters. They rarely make an appeal to the heart. All the best love letters in the world's literature, and especially those written by women, reveal their writer's thoughts in undress: they are free and allusive, and gossipy and usually sincere.

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## *Concerning some Famous Love Letters*

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I should say at a venture that the model love letter in our language will be found where we find all models of excellence—in Shakespeare. Though Love is not a logician, Falstaff's letter to Mrs. Page is at once logical and analytical. It appeals to the reason as strongly as it does to the passions, and it concludes with an undying protest of affection :—

“Thine own true knight,  
By day or night,  
Or any kind of light,  
With all his might,  
For thee to fight.”

But that letter was written for Falstaff by Shakespeare. We should like to know what the bard said to Ann Hathaway ; for logic and reason hold no common cause with passion in the commerce of love. Nowadays the publication of love letters is not regarded seriously as in any sense a breach of trust or a reflection on the dead. To the love letters of Pope, Cowper, and Swift among poets have been added those of Shelley, Keats, Byron and Browning. Nelson's to Lady Hamilton may now be read side by side with Napoleon's to Josephine, and Bismarck's to his wife ; and even Carlyle has been exhibited in the halycon days of first love.

Here and there we have a protest from those who regard all publishers as Philistines. The question has often been asked : Ought what is written in the strictest confidence and privacy from one person to another to be exposed after the lapse of years to the vulgar gaze of the crowd and the sacrilegious treatment of the reviewers ? It depends. Often enough the writers themselves anticipated such a

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## *Concerning some Famous Love Letters*

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meeting with posterity. Keats declared that those passionate and pathetic letters of his to Miss Brawne might some day see the light, and yet when they were included in a popular edition a few years ago, Mr. Sydney Colvin said if he read them he should feel like a man who was peeping through a keyhole. But I do not suppose that any one will deny that the Brawne correspondence is full of exquisite thoughts, or that it serves to give us a deeper understanding of the heart of the poet.

In love letters, more than any other form of literature, we may discover something of the real character and the genuine emotions of men and women who in their lives and writings are always playing a part. The grim Napoleon, full of the pride of conquest, halts after Jena to write a love letter to Josephine. The letter has the reek of the battlefield over it; but for the note of human tenderness at the foot it might pass for an official despatch to Versailles:—

“MY DEAR,—I have made excellent manoeuvres against the Prussians. Yesterday I won a great victory. They had 150,000 men. I have made 20,000 prisoners, taken 100 pieces of cannon and flags. I was in the presence of the King of Prussia, and near to him; I nearly captured him and the Queen. For the past two days I have bivouacked. I am in excellent health.

“Adieu dear. Keep well and love me. If Hortense is at Mayence give her a kiss; also to Napoleon and to the little one.”

But when we set out to consider the literary value of the world's most famous love letters, it will be found that those which have the soundest claim on our attention do not as a rule chronicle the record of a single, calm, pure,



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## *Concerning some Famous Love Letters*

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and unselfish passion, nor are they always free from the elements of pathos and tragedy. There are limitations even to the endless variations which genius can give to the literary embodiment of a supreme passion. When that passion is fixed and unalterable, and under its influence the man drifts naturally into a happy and undisturbed state of domestic felicity, the romance evaporates, and the story of saccharine blissfulness is apt to pall considerably. No man can write a fine love letter with his feet on his own fire irons. In other words the tale of undivided happiness has not much attraction for us. It is in muddy waters that most of us delight to fish. Therefore it comes about that Steele's endearing little notes to his second wife (which, by the way, she has been accused of hoarding up for publication), and the overpowering sweetness of the Brownings' and the Wordsworths' do not afford any very great variety of interest. The absence of those obstacles to human felicity that are created by frailties of character and conduct leave them almost devoid of dramatic interest. Byron flaunting his intrigues in the face of the world, and Burns philandering with Clarinda, are more fascinating figures in the book of romance than any of their more respectable contemporaries. But, the love affairs of poets have never been marked by that calm and serenity which are so destructive of human interest. Petrarch and Dante have not been the only pair who idealised loves away from their own firesides. I always remember the observation which Hogg records in his biography as made to Shelley :—

“ How many great poets like yourself could the world bear to have in it at once without being altogether ruined ? ”

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## *Concerning some Famous Love Letters*

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Like the majority of his tribe Shelley kicked over the matrimonial traces, and his best love letters are those which he wrote to Mary Wollstonecraft before the pair eloped from London. Byron was almost a perfect letter writer. Whatever may be said against Byron, and however shocking his profligacies, it is impossible to regard a man as entirely bad who could write such a manly and straightforward letter as the one to Lady Byron, acknowledging the receipt of the hair of his child Ada. Lady Byron, having apparently made a reunion impossible, the writer could say no more. Two or three extracts from this letter are worth reprinting:—

“Recollect, however, one thing either in distance or nearness, every day which keeps us asunder should, after so long a period, rather soften our natural feelings, which must always have one rallying point as long as our child exists, which I presume we both hope will be long after either of her parents.

“The time which has elapsed since the separation has been considerably more than the whole of the period of our union, and the not much longer one of our prior acquaintance. We both made a bitter mistake; but now it is over, and irrevocably so, for a thirty-three on my part and a few years less on yours, though it is no very extended period of life, still it is one when the habits and thoughts are generally so forward as to admit of no modification; and as we could not agree when younger we should with difficulty do so now. . . . But this very impossibility of reunion seems to me at least a reason why on all the few points of discussion which can arise between us, we should preserve the courtesies of life, and as much of its kindness as people who are never to meet may preserve perhaps more easily than nearer connexions.

“For my own part, I am violent, but not malignant; for only fresh provocations can awaken my resentments. To you, who are colder and more concentrated, I would just hint that you may sometimes mistake the depth of a cold anger for dignity and a worse feeling for duty. I assure you that I bear you now (whatever I

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## *Concerning some Famous Love Letters*

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may have done) no resentment whatever. Remember if you have injured me in aught this forgiveness is something ; and that if I have injured you it is something more still, if it be true as the moralists say, that the most offending are the least forgiving."

This is not a love letter, but it is the letter of a man who, whatever his failings, cannot be fairly charged with striving to extinguish the affection he once felt for his wife. The entanglement with Lady Caroline Lamb and the liaison with the Countess Guiccioli reveal Lord Byron's supremacy in the art of composing a love letter. Some of those to the Venetian must be numbered among the tenderest and most beautiful in the language. The Caroline Lamb connection ended on another note.

Burns was all his life a prolific letter writer, and the Clarinda-Sylvander correspondence is the best example of his amatory style. The fascinating young ploughman poet had more than one entanglement on hand when he swam into the ken of the West Indian planter's wife, and began an acquaintance which, as the letters show, very nearly ended in disaster for them both. Whether Burns's extravagant protestations of undying love were genuine or not, matters very little. Clarinda has to share the poet's affections with Ellison Begbie, Handsome Nell, Chloris, and Peggy Chalmers. The letters have no very great literary value. They smell of the lamp. Their gush and rhapsodisings are occasionally grotesque. For love letters they certainly present much variety, the subjects discussed between the opening and closing declarations of passion including theology, books, poetry, and inevitably love and marriage. Burns had an idea

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## *Concerning some Famous Love Letters*

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that he could be platonic in his affections ; he was the last man in the world capable of restraint. Mrs. M'Lehose reminded him in one of the first letters she ever wrote that he must be careful not to pay his addresses to a married woman. The reply of Burns is a half-playful assurance of his integrity :—

“ Pay my addresses to a married woman ! I started as if I had seen the ghost of him I had injured. I recollected my expressions ; some of them were indeed, in the law phrase, ‘ habit and repute,’ which is being half guilty. I cannot possibly say, Madam, whether my heart might not have gone astray a little ; but I can declare upon the honour of a poet that the vagrant has wandered unknown to me. I have a pretty handsome troop of follies of my own, and like some other people’s they are but undisciplined blackguards, but the luckless rascals have something like honour in them—they would not do a dishonest thing.”

Not many days passed before these fine protestations were forgotten, and Burns was making violent love. In the following passage, which will illustrate his style very well, he imagines what would happen if they could defy the laws of gravitation, and fly away together :—

“ Don’t you see us, hand in hand, or rather my arm about your lively waist, making our remarks on Sirius, the nearest of the fixed stars ; or surveying a comet, flaming innoxious by us as we just now would mark the passing pomp of a travelling monarch ; or in a shady bower of Mercury or Venus dedicating the hour to love, in mutual converse, relying honour, and revelling endearment, whilst the most exalted strains of poesy and harmony would be the most spontaneous language of our souls.”

Perhaps the most pathetic little volume of love letters in the language is that containing the record of Keats’ passion for Fanny Brawne. Some of these letters of Keats

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## *Concerning some Famous Love Letters*

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are not unworthy of a place beside his poetry. "Do you hear the thrush singing over the field?" he says in one place. "I hope he was fortunate in his choice this year." And again:—

"Thank God I am born. . . . Thank God that you are fair and can love me without being letter-written and sentimentalised into it."

The record of this consuming passion, as it grows more hopeless, is indeed pitiable—the poet is stricken down with a sense of his own impotence, and now and again there runs through his letters a selfish and querulous note. I would give one more quotation:—

"I cannot be happier away from you. 'Tis richer than an argosy of Pearles. Do not threat me, even in jest. I have been astonished that men could die martyrs for religion—I have shuddered at it. I shudder no more—I could be martyred for my religion—love is my religion—I could die for that."





XI

*THE GREATEST WOMAN LETTER  
WRITER*



"Keep my letters, they will be as good as Madame de Sévigné's forty years hence."

*Lady Mary Wortley Montagu to her daughter.*

## *The Greatest Woman Letter Writer*

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**I**N an age when people write few letters and read less, there is good reason to suppose that Lady Mary Wortley Montagu's remarkable correspondence stands in danger of neglect, even by the lovers of good literature. That would be a great pity, for, as Carlyle once observed in an eloquent appreciation, she "deserves to be remembered as the first Englishwoman who combined the knowledge of classical and modern literature with a penetrating judgment and a correct taste." All things considered, she is something of a prodigy. She began to practise the art of letter writing, as Richardson did, before she was out of her teens, and the correspondence with Mr. Wortley Montagu, with whom she afterwards eloped, has probably never been equalled by a young lady of twenty. It is not with the bold and unconventional attitude of the writer towards the question of marriage, and her defiance of the social customs of the day, that I have any concern. That was remarkable enough, but it belongs to the region of biography. These letters are models of literary grace, and full of a wit and understanding that one would frankly hesitate to place to the credit of so young a writer.

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## *The Greatest Woman Letter Writer*

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Mr. Wortley Montagu, who encountered the young lady casually at his sister's house, was a man considerably her senior, and at the time the acquaintance began had an acknowledged position as a scholar and the friend of the best writers of the day. There is no doubt that he fell deeply in love with Lady Mary, but he seems to have had fears about making her his wife. The correspondence which took place before the elopement reveals him in the light of a lover who does not really know his own mind for long together. He must have reiterated avowals of affection and devotion, and it is this half-doubting, querulous attitude on his part that gives the intercourse something more than a merely sentimental interest, and reveals Lady Mary's talents as a writer. There are few women loving a man as she loved Mr. Montagu who would have written to him with such frankness.

This desire to bring about a perfect understanding before marriage, and to be perfectly sure of her lover's views as well as her own on so momentous a step, afforded her much greater scope and freedom in writing. And her letters are really altogether too dignified and too full of masculine understanding to be placed in the category of love letters. In no place do we find any passionate declarations of love, nor any of the sentimental fustian that is common to this kind of writing in all languages. "Ignorance and folly," she says in one of the first letters, "are thought the best foundations for virtue, as if not knowing what a good wife is was necessary to make them so. I confess that can never be my way of reasoning; as I always forgive an injury when I think it not done out of malice, I can never think

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## *The Greatest Woman Letter Writer*

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myself obliged by what is done without design. Give me leave to say it (I know it sounds vain), I know how to make a man of sense happy ; but then that man must resolve to contribute something towards it himself."

Poor Mr. Montagu seems to have had a partiality for the conventional methods of courtship, and his protests led to another letter on the same lines that I cannot resist quoting :—

"Happiness is the natural design of all the world ; and everything we see done is meant in order to attain it. My imagination places it in friendship. By friendship, I mean an entire communication of thoughts, wishes, interests, and pleasures long undivided ; a mutual esteem which naturally carries with it a pleasing sweetness of conversation, and terminates in the desire of making one or another happy without being forced to run into visits, noise, and hurry, which serve to rather trouble than to compose the thoughts of any reasonable creature.

" . . . I take you to have sense enough not to think this scheme romantic ; I rather choose to use the word friendship than love, because in the general sense that word is spoken it signifies a passion rather founded on fancy than reason ; and when I say friendship, I mean a mixture of tenderness and esteem, and which a long acquaintance increases not decays ; how far I deserve such a friendship, I can be no judge of myself."

This is an admirable definition of the ideal marriage, and yet by the irony of circumstance the woman who could realise it so well in her own mind, and make it plain to the world, failed to profit by her knowledge. These letters contain many more passages of equal reason and discernment expressed in the same felicitous language, and in some cases set off by a playful wit and a quiet note of sarcasm.

But Lady Mary's claim to be regarded as the first woman

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## *The Greatest Woman Letter Writer*

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letter writer in the language must be based on the remarkable correspondence with her only daughter, Lady Bute. And before discussing the high literary merit and the rare judgment and knowledge of the world displayed in these letters let us turn aside to say that as a contribution to the perplexing enigma of Lady Mary's life and conduct, they are of superlative importance. They must prove one of two things: either that she was a consummate hypocrite on all questions of character and morals, or that, as we believe, Horace Walpole and the rest of her detractors did not hesitate to amplify and distort every scrap of malicious gossip for the sake of gratifying a personal spite. The tone of these letters is irreproachable; they are overflowing with wise and exemplary precepts, which the writer owns in a spirit of becoming modesty she has striven her utmost at all times to carry out. There is not a single harsh word against the husband from whom she is so mysteriously separated. On the contrary, he is invariably spoken of with admiration and affection. Comparisons are sometimes made between the writings of Lady Mary and her rival, if not her superior in many respects,—Madame de Sévigné. In reality, vital considerations of temperament and upbringing, to say nothing of marked intellectual differences, render such comparisons entirely unprofitable. Madame de Sévigné was a gifted and vivacious gossip, who in everything she wrote to her child was governed by the heart and not the head. She was in fact the very antithesis of Lady Mary, who whilst no one can question her love for her children—as shown by the efforts she made to redeem a blackguardly son—abhorred sentimentality,



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## *The Greatest Woman Letter Writer*

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and adopted towards them the attitude of an impartial moral guide. They had the benefit of her wide experience of the world, plainly, and sometimes rather too frankly expressed, and she was content with an appeal solely to the understanding.

Lady Bute was well and happily married when this famous correspondence with her mother began. Not unnaturally, therefore, it turned largely upon the education and training of the daughter's children. Lady Mary's own childhood, and her subsequent experience of the kind of life which lay before the sons and daughters of a noble family, fitted her to speak with authority. Probably if she had not been blessed with granddaughters herself, Lady Mary would have made it in her way to bestow elsewhere the results of her observations on the training of the young. She had something of the passion of Lord Chesterfield for adolescence. She was one of the pioneers of women's rights, or perhaps it were better to say no one before her had attacked with such vigour and sincerity the prevalent notion that her sex, as Lord Byron once said, ought to be left to keep house and wait on their lords. But she was not a blue-stocking. Her detestation of that type of female was as strong as Dean Swift's, and she held, moreover, that a wife should implicitly obey her husband in all things. The point she emphasised over and over again in her letters was that without culture and a love of reading women were not only handicapped in social life, but fell into idle and dissolute ways. Much as she differed from Swift, whom she once likened to Caligula, Lady Mary would have endorsed every word of that dignitary's

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## *The Greatest Woman Letter Writer*

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admirable "Letter to a Young Lady on her Marriage." "I could," she says in one place, "give many examples of ladies whose ill-conduct has been notorious, which has been owing to that ignorance, which has exposed them to idleness which is justly called the mother of mischief. There is nothing so like the education of a woman of quality as that of a Prince; they are taught to dance and the exterior part of what is called good breeding, which, if they attain, they are extraordinary creatures in their kind and have all the accomplishments required by their directors."

Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, like Dr. Johnson, was, as some one has said, as much at home among books as a stable-boy among horses. She was a wonderful reader, and perhaps that is one reason why she wrote so well. There have been many noble and eloquent tributes paid to the aristocracy of books, but none I think has ever excelled this one by Lady Mary:—

"I wish your daughter to resemble me in nothing but the love of reading, knowing by experience how far it is capable of softening the cruelest accidents of life; even the happiest cannot be passed over without many uneasy hours; and there is no remedy so easy as books, which, if they do not give cheerfulness, at least restore quiet to the most troubled mind."

It was Rousseau, solitary and melancholy mortal, who discovered that books were never out of place—even at the dinner-table. "I devour alternately a page and a morsel. It seems," he adds, "as if my book were dining with me."

Lady Mary was as she described herself—a "rake" in reading; she read everything from the trivial tale of the



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kitchen wench's wooing to the Latin authors, and at twenty translated the *Enchiridion* of Epictetus. Arriving at her Italian castle late one night, she found Richardson's latest novel awaiting her, and sat up till next morning to finish it. The vogue of the first of English novelists was at its height during the period of the remarkable correspondence with which we are dealing. The woes of "*Clarissa*" and the vicissitudes of "*Pamela*" had moved countless thousands of women to tears, and wafted the incense of their praise to the little back sitting-room of the plebeian publisher and author. The wonderful genius of this unlettered letter writer triumphed over the unsentimental Lady Mary, and with all her hatred of stories that encouraged young people "to hope for impossible events" and "legacies from unknown relations and generous benefactors to distressed virtue," we find her writing:—

"This Richardson is a strange fellow. I heartily despise him, and eagerly read him, nay, sob over his works in a most scandalous manner. The first two lines of '*Clarissa*' touched me as being very resembling to my maiden days; and I find in the pictures of Sir Thomas Grandison and his lady what I have heard of my mother and seen of my father."

In the matter of reading the weakness of the eighteenth century young lady for the utterly frivolous and unreal stories of sentiment was as pronounced as it is to-day, and such productions Lady Mary warmly attacked in her letters to her daughter. To these she preferred even the Rabelaisian humour of Fielding and Smollett, or the piquant autobiographies of Court mistresses. Her comments upon some of the works of this class for penetration and sound

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## *The Greatest Woman Letter Writer*

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judgment, easy grace, vivacity, and humour take rank with the best contributions to literary criticism in the whole range of letters.

"I thank God," she says, "my taste still continues for the gay part of reading." One lengthy letter of hers, containing a description of an Italian lady's indiscretion on the lines of Byron's Donna Julia, although not perhaps desirable for family reading, is remarkable for its wit and humour, and if here and there its coarseness offends, we must not forget that the fashion of the time permitted such freedom both in speech and writing. Moreover, Lady Mary's comments on the folly and sin of the wife are unimpeachable.

Lady Mary could pass with perfect ease from a light and playful disquisition on the follies and frivolities of the time to a philosophic soliloquy on the state of old age and the impossibility of happiness divorced from virtue. To us who live in an age when letter writing is dead this remarkable correspondence from a woman nearing the allotted span of life can never fail to be a cause of wonder. Such inexhaustible variety of fancy, such eloquence of style, and such sound understanding seldom reveal themselves in an old woman, and few indeed are the writings of this class that will bear reading and re-reading, for the sake of the sound wisdom they embody. In spite of the fact that Lady Bute destroyed her mother's journal, containing the material on which most of the Constantinople and other letters were based, it is impossible to think of her otherwise than as a clever woman. Lady Mary would not have written such letters to a fool.

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If the writings to which I have just alluded were not sufficient to establish Lady Mary's supremacy in this branch of literature, there stand to her credit the letters she founded on her experiences during her husband's Embassy to Constantinople.

The authenticity of many of these letters is one of the most perplexing problems that has ever engaged the attention of literary experts. To these we may leave the barren and unprofitable task of analysing and estimating the comparative worth of the many flimsy and indefinite statements which have been put forward on both sides. We have the letters themselves, and that is the great thing. No one who has dipped into their pages can deny that they are rich in entertainment, and models of what easy and elegant writing should be. If those which contain the somewhat saucy and piquant description of the hidden mysteries of the harem were the work of a literary forger, then it only remains to be said that the fidelity displayed in counterfeiting Lady Mary's hand almost justifies us in forgiving the culprit. There is another aspect of the case that must not be overlooked. None of the editors of Lady Mary's works has ever pretended that these letters were received as they are printed, or that they are to be regarded in any other light than as a work of travel thrown into the epistolary form because that was the medium in which the author most excelled. They were carefully compiled from a diary kept during the journey in the East, and beyond a merely homely reference or two at the opening or at the close, introduced for the sake of verisimilitude, the contents consist entirely of descriptions of the countries

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through which the writer passed, the peoples she mingled with, and the views she formed of their habits and situation.

Lady Mary was an epistolary artist who wrote a letter as an artist painted a picture. It is true that all her writings read as though she wrote without constraint or hindrance of any kind. All good letters read like that ; but the form and the structure, the felicitous phrasing and the gay and vivacious atmosphere which pervades them are the outcome of calculated art.

There is no doubt that most of these letters from the East, although dated and addressed to various correspondents in the usual way, were built up by Lady Mary at her leisure after the fashion of a work of fiction ; and pursuing the methods of the literary artificer Lady Mary employed all her resources to make them perfect as literary exercises. Judged, therefore, as examples of spontaneous and ready-made correspondence they must not be. But we can read them as letters and literature, knowing that with a lifetime of leisure, few, if any, writers could produce their equal.

XII

*FOUR LETTERS THAT WILL LIVE*

“ My blessing on a full letter. It has so friendly a look.”  
*Carlyle.*

## XII

### *Four Letters that will Live*

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THE writing of a handsome letter is not nowadays regarded as a very valuable accomplishment. Men and women who in all ages have been ready to seize upon the least pretence for not writing to their friends may now find excuses multiplied to their hands. Dr. Johnson once remarked in a letter to Boswell that he had no patience with the type of letter writers who had nothing more important to tell his friend than that he was, or that he was not, well, that he had, or had not, been in the country. But Dr. Johnson did not live in the days of a garrulous journalism, which leaves the average scribbler little else to write about. Now an excellent letter can of course be written about simply nothing, as Charles Lamb showed in that delightfully quaint introduction to Barron Field with which he furnished a friend who was going out as a missionary to Botany Bay.

Three lines contain all there is to be said about the missionary ; as for the rest of the letter, it is a brilliant piece of humorous improvisation, full of droll, fantastical irrelevances. "Have you got a theatre?" he asks. "What pieces are performed? Shakespeare's, I suppose; not so much for the poetry as for his having once been in danger



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of leaving his country on account of certain small deer. Have you any poets among you? Damn'd plagiarists, I fancy, if you have any. I would not trust an idea or a pocket-handkerchief of mine among 'em."

I know people to whom this sort of writing, like the inimitable letter of Lord Byron's to the editor of "*My Grandmother's Review*," will not make the least appeal. They want facts, not fantasy; and there are so many newspapers in the world that no fact of any very great moment is allowed to ripen twenty-four hours for the letter writer. The indifference to the epistolary form is equally pronounced in literary circles. At the beginning of the last century letter writing showed signs of losing its place as one of the polite arts. The traditions of Swift and Pope and Johnson and Chesterfield were to some extent preserved for us by Fitzgerald and Carlyle and Matthew Arnold, but where are their successors? Occasionally Lord Morley or Lord Rosebery or Mr. Balfour sits down to write a letter "for publication," and we are reminded of the glories of other days. But such letters are only rare enough to emphasise our poverty. At the same time one must not forget that the giants of the letter writing age took up their pens with reluctance, and if they wrote a great deal more and a great deal better than any one does to-day, it was because letter writing was as much an imperative social obligation then as paying afternoon calls is to-day. None of the best writers among them really confessed to any great relish of the task. The spontaneity, the polish, the amazing vivacity may lead one to think otherwise, but when genius writes at all it must need write well; and men who were

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not in any sense geniuses had been taught that to spend an hour or two over the composition of a letter was a wholesome mental discipline. Yet they were plagued and worried by their correspondence two hundred or a hundred years ago pretty much as we are to-day. They discovered all sorts of excuses for not taking up the pen. Any one who cares to run through a typical batch of the letters of Johnson or Goldsmith or Lamb will find how commonly these experts fell back on the popular plea that their reason for not writing was that there was nothing to write about. If so long as the world wags that excuse must be held to be no excuse at all there was surely more reason for saying so a century or two ago than there is to-day.

The flood-tide of epistolary scribbling is reached in the cases of most men and women when they fall in love, and the finest letters are those addressed by men to women and by women to men. Lord Chesterfield's letters to his son are a notable exception, but if any one ventured to deny my conclusion by quoting Lady Mary Montagu's correspondence with Lady Bute, or Dr. Johnson's letters to Boswell, I should remind the critic of the existence of Lady Mary's remarkable letters to her future husband, and the doctor's genial and playful little notes to Mrs. Thrale. We have none of Dr. Johnson's love letters, but if he ever wrote any they must have been good reading.

Byron once said that he never wrote a line till he was in love; and Burns, under the influence of the same passion, squandered a shilling he could ill afford on a tradesman's complete letter writer. And what graceful and dignified and leisurely letters were exchanged by the lovers in

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the old days! Richardson, perhaps the most incurable scribbler that ever lived, gathered round him a "flower-bed of ladies," to whom he wrote volumes about "Clarissa," and "Sir Charles Grandison," and that rude fellow Fielding. Where nowadays can we match Cowper's letters to Mrs. Unwin, or Swift's to Stella?

Every one who can appreciate the eighteenth-century passion for a good letter ought to be able to lay claim to a well-scored copy of Lady Mary Wortley Montagu's correspondence. In such a copy we should expect to find a note of admiration written opposite to that almost perfect example of the reply complimentary to be found in the whole range of epistolary literature—the acknowledgment to the Earl of Stafford for a slight service he had performed for Lady Mary. The letter will always bear reprinting:—

"MY LORD,—You know how to do the most obliging thing in the most obliging manner. In telling me that I have given you pleasure you do not only take from me the shame of being troublesome, but have found a way to make me pleased with myself, since I can never employ my time more to my own satisfaction than in showing your Lordship that I am, with the utmost gratitude and esteem, my Lord,

"Your Lordship's most obedient humble servant."

It is necessary to read this letter through more than once to admire thoroughly the ingenuity of the reasoning and the verbal dexterity with which it is expressed. How many women would ever have thought of seizing upon the careless formality of Lord Stafford's reply, and interpreting it in such a manner as to leave her benefactor convinced that if there was any obligation at all, then it was on his

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side? Yet Lady Mary affected to despise letter writing by women.

“As to writing—that any woman would do who thought she writ well. Now I say no woman of common sense would. At best ’tis but doing a silly thing well, and I think it is much better not to do a silly thing at all.”

This from the woman who probably with one single exception—and I am not so sure of that either—wrote better than any of her sex had ever done before or have ever done since, and who, whatever Pope might have thought, could give him a beating and a good deal to spare.

To encounter over and over again a letter one admires greatly, must lead sooner or later to comparisons. There are some letters that will endure as long as the language, and two of the most notable ones belong to the eighteenth century.

Perhaps the noblest and manliest piece of composition in the whole of Dr. Johnson’s writings is that famous letter in which the author of “*Rasselas*” declined to accept the belated patronage of the Earl of Chesterfield. No one admired the art of letter writing more than this exemplar of good manners. It was one of the accomplishments he urged upon his stupid son, in a series of letters that Sainte-Beuve says are the best things in our language, and of which Voltaire wrote: “*Je ne sais si ce n’est pas le meilleur livre d’éducation qu’on ait jamais fuit.*”

There can be no greater contrast in point of style than exists between the letters of these two men. The fundamental differences which separated them on moral ques-

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tions have been embodied in an epigram that is as pitiless in its savagery as it is inimitable in its terseness.

Dr. Johnson was not an epistolary gossip, nor a mentor of manners, and except in occasional letters to Mrs. Thrale in a domestic vein, he writes of serious affairs in a serious way, always maintaining that lofty and dignified style that we call "Johnsonese." He is always under a temptation to get into the pulpit and preach, and especially when his correspondent is Boswell. Whatever Boswell's failings, like young Stanhope, it could not be said that he lacked advice.

Johnson wrote his finest letters, as he made his best epigrams, under the influence of strong passion, or when suffering from a fancied wrong. The circumstances which provoked the Chesterfield letter, so proud and sad, and yet so noble in its sincerity, have been discussed from all points of view. It is safe to say that whether the peer was treated quite fairly by his "Hottentot" dictionary-maker or not, most people would rather they had been enemies a thousand times over than that the world should have been deprived of that letter. But Johnson returned to the charge so often and had so much to say concerning the ingratitude of patrons that one cannot help thinking that he must have been badly treated. The author of "Rasselas" was not a proud and vindictive man; no one would have been more conscious of the honour of Lord Chesterfield's patronage had it been given at the time he waited in the lobby of that nobleman's house, only to see Colley Cibber granted a privilege which was denied to him. The reparation, if it was any reparation at all, came too



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late ; the dictionary was carried through, as Johnson says, in a passage both grand and impressive in the stately march of its English :—

“ Not in the soft obscurities of retirement, or under the shelter of academic bowers, but amidst inconvenience and distraction ; in sickness and in sorrow, and without the patronage of the Great.”

Johnson's wound was not to be salved over by gold or flattery. He did not go to Chesterfield in the first instance for either. He sought the encouragement of a powerful patron for the sake of the work and its prospects, and he never forgot that it was the work that had been slighted. Sir Thos. Robinson was sent by the Earl to bring about a reconciliation, and he is reported to have assured Johnson that had his income permitted it, he would have settled £500 a year on the author. “ Sir,” replied Johnson, “ if the first peer in the realm were to make me such an offer, I would show him the way downstairs.” Chesterfield also sent £100 to the doctor, which he returned, adding to a friend, “ Sir, I found I must have gilded a rotten post.”

This famous letter which I set out to praise has a cynical ring about it not usual in Johnson's writings. “ Is not a patron, my lord,” he asks, “ one who looks with unconcern on a man struggling for life in the water, and when he has reached ground encumbers him with help ? The notice which you have been pleased to take of my labours, had it been early had been kind ; but it has been delayed till I am indifferent, and cannot enjoy it ; till I am solitary, and cannot impart it ; till I am known, and do not want it. I hope it is no very cynical asperity not to confess obliga-

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## *Four Letters that will Live*

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tions where no benefit has been received, or to be unwilling that the publick should consider me as owing that to a patron, which Providence has enabled me to do for myself." That letter would set a few tongues wagging in the Mitre. There is one sentence in "The Idler" which always recalls the passage describing the sickness of the heart at this hope deferred :—

"What we have missed long enough to want it, we value more when it is regained ; but that which has been lost till it is forgotten will be found at last with little gladness."

In indicating what I consider to be perfect letters, it must not be forgotten that the matter is one of individual choice. Many people are set against Lord Byron's letters by those very qualities of flippancy and cynical impudence that have constituted their main charm in other eyes. Some few sentimentalists among us can doubtless tolerate the preposterously extravagant worship that Burns brings to the shrine of his Clarinda. Lamb's delightful inconsequentiality and his quaint humour, Cowper's model English, and Richardson's irreproachable tea-party manner are all in their own way inimitable. Who remembers, to make a digression, that remark of Lovelace's in a letter about "Clarissa" :—

"Yet there are people, and I have talked with some of them who remember that she was born."

But such letters as these two of Lady Mary Montagu and Dr. Johnson carry conviction everywhere ; there can be no questioning their supremacy. I also recall two others that belong to the first rank : Dean Swift's "Letters to a



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Very Young Lady on Her Marriage," and Lord Byron's "Letter to the Editor of My Grandmother's Review." The author of "A Tale of a Tub" was a master alike of the formal dignified didactic style and the light and playful manner that finds expression in that budget of baby letters to Stella, recounting his walks, his meetings with courtiers and nobles and the fashionable follies of the day. As a capital instance of how he excelled in the gossipy vein, what is there more quotable than the letter to Stella in which he expresses his surprise that a certain lady of their acquaintance has given over card playing:—

"Mrs. Manley foresworn euchre! What! and no blazing star appeared? No monsters born, no whale thrown up?"

The advice contained in the letter to the newly married young lady is as sound and as applicable as ever. It is conveyed in perfectly chosen language of simple directness and unmistakable sincerity. I do not suppose that the hints it conveys are to the taste of the majority of women, and it is easy to see by the tone that the writer is convinced of the superiority of the husband. As he was constantly urging Stella to read and spell correctly, he impresses on the wife the necessity for educating herself so that she may be a fit companion for her husband. Then we come to the following excellent passage:—

"I am ignorant of any one quality that is amicable in a man which is not equally so in a woman; I do not except even modesty and gentleness of nature. Nor do I know one vice or folly which is not equally detestable in both. There is indeed one infirmity which is generally allowed you, I mean that of cowardice; yet there would seem to be something very capricious that when women

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profess their admiration for a Colonel or a Captain on account of his valour, they should fancy it a very graceful and becoming quality in themselves to be afraid of their own shadows; to scream in a barge when the weather is calmest, to run from a cow at a hundred yards' distance, to fall into fits at the sight of a spider, an earwig, or a frog."

The Dean always spoke his mind to the other sex.

Lord Byron's "Letter to the Editor of My Grandmother's Review" is not as well known as it deserves to be. It is, in spite of its studied insolence, its malignity, and its occasional patches of cheap humour, a remarkable piece of satirical writing. No doubt the editor of the "British Review" laid himself open to attack by the pompous and wholly ridiculous reply he made to that humorous couplet in "Don Juan":—

"For fear some prudish readers who grow skittish,  
I've bribed My Grandmother's Review—The British."

"No misdemeanour," wrote this editor, in the white heat of a virtuous passion, "not even that of sending into the world obscene and blasphemous poetry, the product of studious lewdness and laboured impiety—appears to us in so detestable a light as the acceptance of a present by an editor of a Review as the condition of praising an author." No wonder Byron could not resist the opportunity of gibbeting the writer. The letter is too long to quote, and the sting and cleverness of the satire are apt to evaporate somewhat under condensation. The following extract has always seemed to me delightfully funny:—

"In the first place his lordship has no grandmother. Now the author—and we may believe him in this—doth expressly state that

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the 'British' is his 'Grandmother's Review'; and if as I think I have distinctly proved this was not a mere figurative allusion to your supposed intellectual age and sex, my dear friend, it follows, whether you be she or no, that there is such an elderly lady still extant. And I can the more readily credit this, having a sexagenary aunt of my own, who perused you constantly till unfortunately falling asleep over the leading article of your last number, her spectacles fell off, and were broken against the fender after a faithful service of fifteen years, and she has never been able to fit her eyes since; so that I have been forced to read you aloud to her; and this is, in fact, the way in which I became acquainted with the subject of my present letter, and thus determined to become your public correspondent."



XIII

*NO ROOM FOR POETRY*

“ A man may play the fool in everything else, but not in poetry.”  
*Montaigne.*

### XIII

## *No Room for Poetry*

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IT will not be disputed, I suppose, that the majority of mankind are born into the world absolutely destitute of any real sense or feeling for the highest poetry. But if any one doubts the literal truth of this statement, let him the first time he is in intimate company, where such a liberty would not be resented, quote, say, one of those exquisitely idyllic passages from "Aucassin and Nicolette," or a sonnet of Sidney's, and watch the effect. Be it understood, of course, that the authorship is not disclosed. In these two cases, his friends would probably be none the wiser, but at the mention of Shakespeare, or Milton, or Shelley, or Keats there would be an instant murmur of approval, so universal is the sham reverence nowadays paid to established names. Education, as the word is commonly understood, has very little to do with the question, and an unlettered old woman will often know more of poetry than all the professors. For no amount of learning will make a man sensible to the appeal of high poetry any more than it will make him a poet. But he must be something of a poet by inheritance to appreciate and understand the full majesty of Claudio's speech on Death in "Measure for Measure," or the rare charm of



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Perdita's address to the flowers in "The Winter's Tale." Keats is a rare instance of a naturally gifted mind which, free from all pedantry and unburdened by scholarship, was able to bring itself into imaginative kinship with Shakespeare, to discover hidden poetry everywhere in his works. No finer tribute has ever been paid to Shakespeare than is contained in a remark in one of Keats's letters:—

"I begin to think that Shakespeare is about enough for us."

Few men are born with the imaginative insight and the magic spark of sympathy which makes Keats a fine commentator, as well as a great poet. But those who care to follow him in his studies of Shakespeare may soon find out for themselves how far they have been endowed by Nature with the gift of understanding poetry.

To the minds of many people who come within the general category, the finest and most exalted passages in the poetry of the world represent nothing more than a medley of words in which they are often quick to perceive a plentiful lack of practical ideas. A fine phrase or a beautiful simile makes no appeal to them, unless for the purposes of dissection. In this respect they are not unlike Charles Lamb's Scotchman, who, hearing some one remark of John Bunce that it was a "healthy" book, replied: "Did I catch rightly what you said? I have heard of a man in health, and of a healthy state of body, but I do not see how that epithet can be properly applied to a book." The other day, a reader of this class discovered a flaw in Keats's almost matchless "Ode on a Grecian Urn." Will

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it be believed that he objected to the following well-known lines on the ground that heifers do not low :—

“ Who are these coming to the sacrifice ?  
To what green altar, O mysterious priest,  
Lead'st thou that heifer lowing at the skies.”

Keats is in good company. Shakespeare did not escape criticism of the same kind in the eighteenth century when Pope and his contemporaries were engaged in settling the question of his immortality. Dr. Johnson, in spite of all his excellences, and the fact that he has never been surpassed in prose imagery, was not always a safe guide in Shakespearean criticism. Did he not object strongly to Macbeth's use of the words “ knife ” and “ blanket ” in the magnificent soliloquy :—

“ Come, thick night !  
And pall thee in the dunnest smoke of hell  
That my keen knife see not the wound it makes,  
Nor heav'n peep through the blanket of the dark,  
To cry, Hold ! Hold ! ”

In the paper from which this criticism of “ Macbeth ” is taken, Dr. Johnson, dealing with the difficulties of poetic diction, points out that no word is naturally or intrinsically meaner than another ; and that our opinion of words, as of other things arbitrarily and capriciously established, depends wholly upon accident and custom. This calls to one's mind at once the case of Wordsworth. More than any other modern poet, he found himself ridiculed, and often rightly so, because he endeavoured to deal with high themes in the simplest and barest phraseology, forgetting that one of the first essentials of poetry is that it should

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touch the imagination in a way that is impossible with common things. No one, for instance, could ever be impressed with the lines from the "Blind Highland Boy":—

"A household tub, like one of those  
Which women use to wash their clothes,  
This carried the Blind Boy."

The blind boy in the wash tub is an unpardonable slip into bathos that has rarely been equalled, and perhaps never surpassed, by a great poet. But if any one wishes to see how the description of a noble and impressive scene may be vulgarised, and made contemptible in poetry, he can, after studying Genesis, take the advice of Coleridge, and read Drayton's account of the Flood. Drayton wrote how—

"The King of Beasts his fury doth suppress,  
And to the ark leads down the lioness.  
The bull for his beloved mate doth low,  
And to the ark brings in the fair-eyed cow."

The same scene is described with great economy of words by Milton in "Paradise Lost," but there is no detailed catalogue of the animals in language which involuntarily calls up merriment, and in that way reduces what is intended to be an impressive piece of writing to the level of caricature. But the unfortunate use of words and similes, which, when they are placed in a certain connection, destroy at once all sense of grandeur, and dignity, has been a fruitful subject for the humorists from the earliest times. A less common fault, and one which can only be detected by those who understand and appreciate the best poetry, is often the outcome of a lack of humour on the part of the

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## *No Room for Poetry*

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poet, or a failure to translate his thoughts into the terms of poetry. Joseph Cottle (of Byron's quite irrelevant "Oh, Phœbus, what a name !"), going up Malvern Hills, sings :—

"How steep ! How painful the ascent !  
It needs the evidence of close deduction  
To know that I shall ever gain the top."

Lamb mentions in one of his letters to Manning that Cottle read two or three acts of his tragedy over to him. In one scene it is set out that the enemy has engaged twelve archers to come over in a boat from an enemy's country and waylay him ; and he thereupon pathetically exclaims : "Twelve dost thou say ? Curse on those dozen villains." Lamb collapsed at this heroic touch ; in his own words he "had no more muscles that day." Mr. Robert Montgomery, as readers of Macaulay will remember, sings of a slain warrior who, while "lying on his bleeding breast," manages to "stare ghastly and grimly on the skies," and a murderer "with ashy lips in cold convulsion spread."

Yet some of the most popular poetry of to-day—indeed the only poetry that sells to any appreciable extent—is plentifully strewn with similar absurdities of speech, and often vulgarised to the level of the music-hall. Wordsworth declared to Lady Beaumont that "there neither is, nor can be, any genuine enjoyment of poetry among nineteen out of twenty of those persons who live, or wish to live, in the broad light of the world—among those who either are, or are striving to make themselves, people of consideration in society." The pressure of modern life is so great, and the bare struggle for existence so exacting, that the average man finds very little room for poetry in his

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world. Even the man who is born with both imagination and the lyrical sense finds the conditions of life oppressive and inimical to the enjoyment of the highest poetry. Those conditions are, it is to be feared, telling on the production of the race of poets also.

The question will be asked at once by those who find enjoyment in the militant rhymes of the jingo poets: "What then constitutes great poetry?" Opinions differ even among those who are supposed to be the best judges of the matter, and I remember that a scholar and a critic recently declined to accept the following lines from William Blake as coming strictly under this head:—

"When the stars threw down their spears,  
And watered Heaven with their tears,  
Did He smile His work to see?  
Did He who made the lamb make thee?"

These lines are, of course, of the very essence of poetry; but to make them intelligible they must be read in connection with the rest of that noble poem in which Blake addresses the tiger of the forest. Not that any one need always demand that poetry should have a clear and unmistakable meaning, or bear translation into the commonplace thoughts of everyday life. It is sufficient that it is rare and beautiful, for all things rare and beautiful are good. The Philistine will differ from me, I know, and to him I would only quote that incomparable couplet from "The Ode to a Nightingale," and ask whether, although defying analysis, it does not belong to the highest regions of poetry:

"Magic casements, opening on the foam  
Of perilous seas, in faery lands forlorn."

XIV

*THE MUSE ON THE MARKET*



“ Mr. William Watson's first book, ‘ The Prince's Quest,’ published in 1880, waited just ten years before a hundred copies had been sold, and these were mostly bought by the author and his friends ! ”

“ *The Westminster Gazette.* ”



#### XIV

### *The Muse on the Market*

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OF course everybody gaily admits nowadays that there is no market for poetry—poets, editors, reviewers, and most of all, publishers. Publishers, on the whole not a very enterprising class, have, since the war brought about a revival, started to retail the Muse on the penny plain and twopence coloured principle. No longer do we get the poet in the plain octavo of the Mid and Late Victorians, with the familiar frontispiece—a wood-cut of Arcadia—Pan and the purling rivulet, the sheep and the goats, and the myrtle bowers—*à tout ensemble*, which in those far-off days seemed to be the right and proper hallmark of a book of poetry. How that gorgeous allegory determined for us eternally the mystic character of the poet's calling! We were permitted, so to speak, a peep through the pearly gates. But this is all changed now. Poetry of all ages, from the odes of Horace to the ballads of Sir John Suckling, or the tremulous love-story of Aucassin and Nicolette, comes to us in a new and rich investiture. Farewell to the sweet simplicity of the pastoral scene, or the dream pictures of the dim woods wherein the melancholy figure of the poet wanders alone communing with the gods. The modern Muse is turned

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out like a gay debutante, becurled and scented, all ribbons and furbelows. Books of verse have their leaves tipped with gold; artists decorate the opening and the closing pages, and, so sumptuously arrayed, they await in the booksellers' shops the coming of the sentimental young man and maiden.

The cloth or the plain edition is really not plain at all, for it has its bookmarker of silk, and many other signs of an extravagant bringing-up. It matters not to any one except, perhaps, an occasional reviewer, what lies between those dainty covers. And the reviewer—who shall blame him?—is ready with his meed of praise for those who have decked the slopes of Parnassus with flowers and lighted up its peaks with the rich glow of the sunset.

How often are we told that people will not take poetry for better or for worse on its merits as poetry alone? It is an age of hustle, and (says the critic) the world has no need of the romantic poet and the dreamer, who starved in garrets or lived on the crumbs from his patron's table. Of course he is careful to say that the age is no better for this. He is like the age itself in this; that he keeps up the pretty convention that poetry is a lovely thing, and of good report, and ought really to adapt itself to modern needs, or if not, then the publisher ought to do what the gramophone people have done in music—give the world its poetry in tabloid packets with silver paper, shout it through megaphones or throw it on the bioscope. They are, as a solid matter of fact, making cinema films out of it in America.

Yet the age is not peculiar in its Philistinism. Poetry

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was never a saleable commodity. Granted that a hundred years ago the Muse had a better show than she has to-day, one finds that even then there was the same coldness towards her on the part of the so-called "practical" man.

I have just unearthed in a bookseller's shop in the Euston Road one of the very earliest anthologies, dated 1807, fifty years before Palgrave's "Golden Treasury" took pride of place in this department of letters. It is the kind of collation that would have delighted the heart of Polonius. Here I find verse, sacred, and moral, didactic, descriptive, narrative, pathetic, dramatic, epic, and miscellaneous. But the most interesting and curious feature of it all is the preface, which consists of an eloquent and flowery defence of the art of poetry, and a vigorous indictment of those utilitarian spirits who would away with it. It would almost seem to these critics that a love of poetry in the young was regarded as a vice demanding the most rigorous suppression. And this was in an age when the popular poet was Cowper, who had turned from such innocent pleasures as gardening and taming hares to the production of the Olney Hymns!

"Why, there are some," says the author of our apologia, "who have thought that a taste for poetry interfered with an attention to what they called 'the main chance.'" "Scribbling verses and making love," as Burns had observed a little earlier; and the prejudice has descended to our own day, when the sad lot of the minor poet certainly does something to justify the assertion. It is seldom, to paraphrase a great writer, that any one discovers mines of gold and silver in Parnassus.

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## *The Muse on the Market*

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The odds against the poet are still as great as ever they were, but we who are the poet's good friends differ from the compiler of this anthology on one point. We do not find it necessary to go out and fight for the very existence of poetry. The attitude of the man who never reads it is still one of silent admiration, and he permits Mr. Frederic Harrison to tell him that he should go down on his knees and pray for that Divine Spirit which will enable him to appreciate the "Ode to a Grecian Urn." How different was the public to whom the compiler of my "Poetical Epitome"—as he calls it—had to appeal! Poetry—away with it! It is not saleable like bonds. You cannot exchange it for a landed estate, or even a brand-new periwig. That it should exist merely as any other beautiful thing exists does not seem to have occurred to these early Philistines. Therefore says our valiant defender:—

"To obviate their objections it is necessary to remind them that poetry has ever claimed the power of conveying instruction in the most effective manner by the vehicle of pleasure."

I have been trying to conjure up a vision of the author of this most ingenious preface. Perhaps he was a minor poet himself, and the iron had entered his soul. There he sits—an old man I should imagine—probably a schoolmaster, who, in his youth, had the great Dr. Johnson pointed out to him. I have no doubt at all that he read "The Rambler" when it came out in weekly numbers. Certainly, he has imbibed the dignity and pomp of the Johnsonian manner, though he has nothing of the doctor's good humour. I don't know whether he recalled the remark of

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## *The Muse on the Market*

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Johnson to Boswell that poetry, being merely a luxury, it must be exquisite of its kind or we did not want it at all. He is bent on marketing this book of his by dealing with the Philistine on his own ground. "It will," he says, in effect, "be a good thing for the man who has his eye on 'the main chance'!" No family should be without a copy. A fine ode is not to him a fine ode and nothing more. It may lead to the Primacy or to the Woolsack. Hearken to this:—

"The greatest men in every liberal and honourable profession gave their early years to the charms of poetry. Many of the most illustrious worthies in the Church and in the State were allured to the land of learning by the song of the Muse; and they would perhaps never have entered it if their preceptors had forbidden them to lend an ear. Of so much consequence is the study of poetry in youth to the general advancement of learning."

One would give something to know the fate of this volume. Did it, in spite of all this trumpeting, languish on the shelves of the bookseller, or did it run into many editions? As a book it is nothing to look at. It is solid and substantial, like the old oak furniture on which it doubtless reposed for long years unread. But it is for all tastes and for all time; and side by side with all the obscure worthies who have a place in Johnson's "Lives," I encounter Gay and Herrick, "Mr." Pope (as he is most respectfully called), and—blessings on the memory of the old man—a selection of those delightful old English ballads which are a part of our national heritage. Great spirits have sojourned in the land since 1807, such as, in the words of the wise son of Sirach, "found out musical tunes and

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## *The Muse on the Market*

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recited verses in writing." To the list quoted by our stately old editor—Shakespeare, Milton, Pope, and Gray—we can at least add five other immortals. But is the Muse any more marketable for all that? Is she not still a beggar at the gate, though her raiment be of purple and of fine linen?



XV

*A PLEA FOR THE MINOR POET*



"The works of the minor poets contain passages or single lines that can only be attributed to the highest imagination, to a sudden and rare endowment that sends us to the work of the greatest poets for comparison."

*"Centenary Biography of Oliver Wendell Holmes."*

"Those attenuated volumes of poetry in fancy bindings open their covers at one like so many little unfledged birds, and one does so long to drop a worm in—a worm in the shape of a kind soft word for the poor fledgling."

*Oliver Wendell Holmes.*

*A Plea for the Minor Poet*

“**I**N the spring a young man’s fancy lightly turns to thoughts of love.” How Tennyson’s well-known couplet trips glibly off the tongue of the laughing Philistine; writers for the comic papers grind out their old puerilities, and even serious and dignified journals harbour sly allusions to the passion-stricken minor poet. For there is a widely prevalent notion that each spring the editor’s post-bag is loaded down with a stock of impossible odes to skylarks. The minor poet who is content to wait humbly on the slopes of Parnassus, hoping all things, and enduring all things, must now and again feel his gorge rise as the gratuitous sneer passes round. I really think that some one should undertake a defence of the minor poet. The mere fact that the adjective is applied at all, not, let it be remembered, as a means of differentiation, but in a spirit of open ridicule, is in itself an indignity that ought to be very properly resented. Who for example ever heard of any one speak of a minor musician or a minor painter? Yet whilst music and painting merely produce a thing in itself, poetry, if it is good minor poetry, suggests what exists outside the essence of the thing and is capable of much finer gradations of passion and fancy.

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## *A Plea for the Minor Poet*

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The grown man who writes verse is regarded either with good-natured contempt or with indifference. The average reader is frankly ignorant on the subject of poetry, though if he must occasionally submit to it, he prefers a riot of sentiment or a boisterous jingling measure. And by a strange irony, though he is ignorant of the fact, the very poets to whom he lends a condescending ear are unquestionably minor poets—and very minor indeed at that.

We all know the man who when the subject of poetry is discussed exclaims at once: "Thank goodness! I never wrote a line of poetry in my life"; and the disclaimer is made with that evident sense of relief and thankfulness that might attach to a confession that he had never suffered from an infectious disease. No sooner does a youth leave off scribbling Latin verses than the world enters into a conspiracy to prevent him ever again lapsing into the habit of verse, be it concerning love or any other passion that surges through the human soul. The attitude is that of the elder Weller:—

"Poetry is unnatural. Never you let yourself down to talk poetry, my boy!"

Ridicule, though it may not kill poets (Shelley's "Adonais" notwithstanding), has, I doubt not, brought sharply to a standstill more than one promising youth whose beaming face was turned joyously toward the heights. And there is always the consideration to face that it is about one chance in ten thousand that at the best he will ever turn out to be anything but a very minor poet.

A friend of my own confesses that years ago he laboured

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## *A Plea for the Minor Poet*

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with exaltation and joyousness at a spring lyric, and glowing with pride he carried it to the sanctum of a worldly minded editor. "Yes," said the editor solemnly when he had glanced it through, "leave it with me!" Two days later the pair accidentally met. "You may trust me implicitly," whispered the man in authority, "I burnt it, and not a soul shall ever know of its existence." I suspect that my friend, now long since passed the heyday of youth, joins in the triumph of the Philistines. I know he regards that passionate spring-time lyric as among the indiscretions of an impetuous and hot-headed youth.

But editors are unsympathetic out of all proportion to the trials they undoubtedly have to endure from the wholly illiterate, and that small but extremely pertinacious class of leisurely scribblers—clergymen and others—who write verse without the least idea of the rules of the game. The other day a young and enthusiastic poet sent a sonnet to a newspaper of high standing, and to his delight it was published. The editor, whose literary labours are confined to the leading articles, and who knows nothing of poetry, had no hand in the publication of the poem. Great was his astonishment a few days later when he was effusively greeted by the young poet: "I am delighted that you liked my sonnet. I must thank you for the splendid position you gave it." "Sonnet! Sonnet!" exclaimed the bewildered journalist, "*what the devil is a sonnet?*"

It may be that the mild spirit of contempt which the average journalist feels for the writer with a proclivity for verse is largely induced by the victim himself. Not very long ago a poet of established reputation among the minors

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## *A Plea for the Minor Poet*

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sent off a telegram to the editor of a provincial daily paper containing the warning: "Sonnet on 5.20 train." The precious burden (subject to the ordinary freight charges) arrived safe and sound.

Then the minor poet is the Cinderella of the magazines. The editors calculate the value of his work with a foot rule, making sure that the poem does not overrun the spare half-page which he cannot otherwise fill. No matter how mighty the line, so far and no further! Was it not the printers' foreman who once brought the blush of pride to the cheek of Kipling, then himself a minor poet, by the remark, "I liked that little poem of yours immensely, Mr. Kipling. It just fit the column." One of those familiar rejection forms, cold-blooded printed things, drawn up with almost Oriental politeness, contains the warning that "No poem should exceed thirty lines." And this document emanates from a house that has a reputation for the highest standard of literary taste.

The derisive cry which was hurled at Keats—"Back to your gallipots"—has always followed the young poet into the solitude of his dreams, vexing his tender soul and making him a furtive beggar at the Gate of Letters. It is no new thing, this contempt for the unhappy man who is moved to rhyme. The Elizabethans were as contemptuous as the educated reader of the twentieth century. Ben Jonson in "Bartholomew Fair" says:—

"I began shrewdly to suspect the young men of a terrible taint—Poetry."

That word "taint" defines exactly the orthodox view of

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## *A Plea for the Minor Poet*

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the divine gift. Almost all speakers, and a large majority of writers, think it necessary to apologise for quoting poetry in any serious company—and that not necessarily the poetry of the minor. The grown man who is known to write it is as much the subject of compassionate interest as a person with an ill-balanced mind or a strange and elusive disease. Yet the world is undoubtedly full of poets. The war has revealed that. Locked up securely in countless desks, hidden away from the irreverent eyes of dearest and nearest, are budgets of odes and sonnets that will never see the light. It is only here and there that a man is seized with the irresistible impulse to give to the world the good thing that has come into his heart. He is the minor poet; and down from the snow-topped heights he tumbles into the unfeeling clutches of the Philistines.

Scott, in spite of his own many weak performances, had, I fancy, a mild contempt for the minor poet. There is an unfeeling passage in "Rob Roy" which supports the view that it were better for the minor poet that he had never been born:—

" 'To the memory of Edward, the Black Prince,' reads Frank's father in astonishment. 'What's all this?—Verses! By heaven, Frank, you are a greater blockhead than I supposed you!' 'Then,' says the writer, 'my father read the lines, sometimes with an affectation of not being able to understand the sense—sometimes in a mouthing tone of mock heroic—always with an emphasis of the most bitter irony, most irritating to the nerves of an author.' "

What minor poet who does not number among his household such a one—if not father, then, most likely, wife!



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## *A Plea for the Minor Poet*

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I shall always feel grateful to Oliver Wendell Holmes for what he wrote about the minor poet. "What is forgotten," he said, "is this: that every poet, even of the humblest grade, is an artist."

He does not ask for any more consideration than is bestowed upon the minor in other arts; he asks, indeed, only to be left alone. But, as matters stand at present, the world would almost deprive him of the benefit of clergy.



XVI

*THE POETRY OF NEW LANDS*

They are rhymes rudely strung with intent less  
Of sound than of words,  
In lands where bright blossoms are scentless,  
And songless bright birds;  
Where with fire a fierce drought on her tresses,  
Insatiable summer oppresses  
The woodlands and sad wildernesses  
And faint flocks and herds.

*Adam Lindsay Gordon.*

## XVI

### *The Poetry of New Lands*

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EVERY new land inevitably, in the course of time, seeks to express itself and its emotions in the terms of poetry. But how often do we find in what might be called the poetry of adolescence those inherent and distinctive qualities that are demanded of any enduring form of art? Many generations must pass before the people of a new country can rid themselves entirely of the traditions and sentiments of the homeland, and by absorbing the conditions around them create an original atmosphere and literature of their own. Certainly beautiful and touching verse is born of nostalgia. One recalls, for example, that exquisite Canadian boat song with its pathetic longing for "the lone shieling on a misty island," or, again, Macaulay's Jacobite's epitaph in which the exile—

"Heard on Lavernia Scargill's whispering trees,  
And pined by Arno for my lovelier Tees."

The desire for the land of our birth and upbringing is, of course, one of the oldest and commonest themes of English verse, and in judging of the poetry of a new country one

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## *The Poetry of New Lands*

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must have a greater regard for those writings in which an attempt is made to embody the characteristics and emotional experiences of the exile. One turns naturally to our own Colonies in the search for a modern note in poetry, or some indication of an adolescent force which may develop into a recognised power as the opportunities for leisure and culture continue to grow. South Africa and Canada are beginning to make themselves heard, though as yet they cannot be said to have achieved anything remarkable. In Australia, however, the case is different. It is little more than a century ago since the first of the British Colonists settled there, and yet verse of all kinds has a remarkable vogue. How comes it, I wonder, that whilst in this country the writing of verse is regarded as something of a feminine occupation, the readers of Australian newspapers not only demand a fair quantity day by day, and week by week, but have literary ambitions in this direction themselves? Where in this country can one point to a similar effort in the cultivation of literary taste among the readers of the newspapers? It is true that Australia has not yet produced a great poet. The successors of Henry Kendall and Adam Lindsay Gordon are yet to be born. But the writings of Henry Lawson and A. B. Paterson may be said to mark a distinct development in the history of a genuine and unmistakable literary note. What must inevitably strike an observer as characteristic of the new and younger and more vigorous races is the perfectly natural effort to break away from the well-trodden paths of English poetry and to discover fresh inspiration in the bursting life around them. They will

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## *The Poetry of New Lands*

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have nothing at all to do, for instance, with the insincere conceits and pompous elegancies of the Mid-Victorian. Odes to daisies and all the slushy sentimental fancies of the second-rate Nature "poet" are never even attempted. The cold and calculating pretentiousness of the eighteenth-century style would be received with scorn. They prefer to write poetry about the close and intimate things of their daily life, even at the risk of a certain crudity and over-literal tendency which often brings them near to earth. Not that they are without a feeling for romance. The bulk of their verse deals with love and passion, not, however, as our own minor poets deal with it, discreetly and in the genteel manner of the drawing-room. There is no writing of odes to my lady's eyelashes.

The "girls"—and they are always the "girls"—somehow remind us of the musical comedy type, big bosomed, fine and passionate creatures whose charms are catalogued with an astonishing lack of reticence. And they are hussies some of them. The sort of "girl" the poet delights in is the one who in this country would most likely be met with in a Piccadilly bar or in the chorus of a revue. For the highly conventional and carefully sheltered miss of Suburbia he has no use, unless it be to make irreverent sport of her. In short, all his amorous adventures have a spice of naughtiness about them, but the verse in which they are described, if not exactly suited for a place in the family album, is never dull and pretentious. Out of the stock of this kind of writing a vast deal, of course, is simply not poetry at all, because, in spite of what some of the critics have said, there are subjects about which it is impossible to write

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## *The Poetry of New Lands*

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poetry. One may try manfully as Cowley did with the frogs in "Plagues of Egypt":—

"Unsateiate yet they mount up higher  
Where never sun-born frog durst to aspire."

On the other hand, the kissing of a girl in a taxi-cab may conceivably, under skilful hands, yield a passionate and moving ode. The "young lions" of Australia have not read Swinburne for nothing, and though he is a dangerous guide for lesser men, they realise, apparently, that if sincerity counts for anything—and they are excessively sincere—it is the business of amorous poetry to glorify its wild Bohemianism and spill wine and roses down the steepes of Parnassus. After all, the supreme test of merit lies in sincerity. The reader of verse is familiar enough with the outpourings of the minor poet who, deeming it the business of poetry to deal in scarlet sins, adopts the tone and manner of the genuine artist, whilst the stuff of his thoughts remains merely the hysterical and quite conventional echo of the genuine article.

This is not a charge that can be brought against the Australian poets. Most of them have "learned in suffering what they teach in song." And their poetry is fresher and more realistic and more original for it, despite the remark of Keats that—

"Almost any man may, like the spider, spin from his own inwards, his own airy citadel."

They have "dree'd their weird," as Stevenson said, and come to the writing trade in the hope only of a free artistic life and some few happy days. Henry Kendall, in his

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## *The Poetry of New Lands*

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beautiful lament on the death of his daughter, Araluen, spoke of his wife:—

“ Who because your love was noble, faced with me the lot austere  
Ever pressing with its hardships on the man of letters here.”

There is, in the present-day poetry of the young Australian writers, a general reluctance to achieve pathos in the simple homely way of, say, Kendall, in the poem I have quoted. If anything, they are ashamed of their tears. The sadness and longing are there, the thoughts “too deep for tears,” and if the tears should come, they quench them in laughter. Rare comedy is, of course, very near to tears, and so in reading one of those rollicking twenty stanza poems, rough and coarse in texture, and often a faint echo of Kipling, I have suddenly realised the deep sense of pathos that gave it birth. The situation is accepted in a devil-may-care spirit of irony; the cap and bells are jingled; “the girl’s” kisses linger in the memory, but the taste of dead ashes is in the mouth. To this our modern will reply: “The real material of comedy, after all, is tragedy.”

But there is the question that insists on being answered, when one has become satiated with this minor poetry of Australia: Is it the right way? The spirit of Beauty cannot be cajoled into a tap-room ballad, or imprisoned in a melodious song about the “girls.” The eighteenth-century poet made the mistake of putting a ring fence round his own little plot of “poetical” subjects and ruling out as unsuitable material vast tracts of real life around him. But the present danger is lest we should run to the other extreme, and, by declaring that all things and all forms of



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## *The Poetry of New Lands*

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so-called "life" are legitimate subjects for poetry, lose that indefinable sense of beauty which is, after all, the essence of great poetry. Is it better, in other words, to have the young poet sitting in a garden "spinning from his own inwards" than absorbing "life" among "the girls" who promenade in the gas lights? I dare say it all depends on the poet.

XVII

*A VENETIAN ROMANCE*

"To be in love, where scorn is bought with groans ;  
Coy looks, with heart-sore sighs ; one fading moment's mirth  
With twenty watchful, weary, tedious nights :  
If haply won, perhaps, a hapless gain ;  
If lost, why then a grievous labour won :  
However, but a folly bought with wit,  
Or else a wit by folly vanquished."

*"The Two Gentlemen of Verona."*

*A Venetian Romance*

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THE exquisite pleasure with which one discovers a rare book at the bottom of the twopenny or the threepenny box of a bookshop in the Charing Cross Road is perhaps out of all proportion to the real value of the find. But no book-lover would forego that pleasure or wish it to be diminished. It came my way the other day to find, lying dusty and neglected, Madame Albrizzi's book of portraits of Venetian celebrities, including the sketch of Lord Byron. These pages still reflect something of the glories of that boisterous period when Byron lived out every minute of his life writing, love-making, fighting, drinking, with a zest and abandonment that can only be described by the word Byronic. No other man could have set such a pace or maintained it for any length of time.

But though this Venetian period was one of utter moral decadence, it produced the finest parts of "Don Juan," and in the midst of his revelries Byron found that "his mind wanted something craggy to break itself upon," and therefore set himself to learn Armenian. Once in his early days he remarked to his mother that he liked very much the manners and morals of the Turk, and thought of joining the Turkish army and settling in Turkey. The

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## *A Venetian Romance*

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free and easy morals, or rather the absence of morals, in Venice, the picturesque profligacy of its women and the forbearance of its husbands, held him captive to Venetian Society, where for a time he reigned without a rival. His letters show that he lived up to the gospel he puts into the mouth of Don Juan, a rhyming variant of the Scriptural tag: "Let us have wine and women, mirth and laughter, sermons and soda water the day after." If he wanted an excuse for his conduct, he found it ready made in the vicious theory that poetic genius has often been allied to moral weakness or physical infirmity. Nat Lee mad, Collins mad, Chatterton mad, Cowper mad, Pope crooked, Milton blind, and a host of others either bad or mad. He actually indulged in this reflection in a letter to Moore which will be found in Mr. Murray's latest edition. More than this, it was only by rushing headlong into the gaieties of the world, alternately making love, and verses, and enemies, that his proud spirit could forget the stinging memory of that unheroic retreat from England not long before. Then the temptations to a man of his vanity and voluptuousness were legion. The palaces on the Grand Canal were full of women whose imagination was fired by the theatrical beauty of the noble poet. The first season he was the lion of the Countess Albrizzi's salon, the author of this book of portraits; and the next he was captured by Countess Benzoni. He moved on from conquest to conquest, his heart was always aflame; eternally love-making, posing, preaching. His affections were first captured by a draper's wife; she was succeeded by the partner of a rich merchant; and she in turn made way for a rude young Venetian of

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## *A Venetian Romance*

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ferocious passions and rare devotedness. Byron's attitude at this time towards the outraged feelings of those whom he had led by a mischievous garrulity to take an interest in everything he said and did—the people in whom Byromania was rampant—was now one of contemptuous indifference. He cared neither for them nor their morality, and declared the longer he remained away from England the less cause he saw for “regretting the country or its living contents.”

The Countess Teresa Gamba Guiccioli, who will always be remembered as the central figure of the Venetian period, was an impressionable young Italian of high breeding and superior education. It is the story of the Caroline Lamb affair over again, with the difference that in this case the lady came fresh from a convent. She was ignorant of the meaning of passion and had just been hurried into a marriage of convenience with a rich widower. The Count was sixty and his wife sixteen. Byron was the young and melancholy gallant whose beauty, if anything, was heightened by his dissipations, and around whose achievements in the world of love and letters there had gathered an atmosphere of romance. What might not occur in such a situation? The Countess was at a party of the Benzonis wearing her wedding dress when she encountered Byron, and straightway became his slave. Her description of him at this time is in the language of passionate adoration. She writes of his “noble and exquisitely beautiful countenance,” and the tone of his voice reminds her that some one else once spoke of Byron as “the gentleman with the voice like music.”

Nearly all the descriptions of the Countess agree as to

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## *A Venetian Romance*

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her beauty, which was of the rich and voluptuous type so often found in the children of the sun. Leigh Hunt, who declined to exalt this connection above the level of any of the others in which Byron took part, stands alone in his view that the lady was a kind of buxom parlour boarder, absurdly anxious to pose as a heroine by the side of the poet. But Leigh Hunt showed bad feeling and jealousy of Byron in everything he wrote at this period. Medwin, on the contrary, goes into ecstasies over her. "Her eyes," he writes, "large, dark, and languishing, are shaded by the longest eyelashes in the world; and her hair, which is ungathered on her head, plays over her falling shoulders in a profusion of natural ringlets of darkest auburn. . . . She has the most beautiful mouth and teeth imaginable. It is impossible to see without admiring her—to hear the Guiccioli speak without being fascinated." Byron also writes with equal enthusiasm, and adds in reference to the lady's mental accomplishments that—

"If she has blue stockings she contrives that her petticoats shall hide them."

The poet was always like the hero of *Don Juan* "with women what they please to make or take him for," and accordingly the Countess soon found her passion was reciprocated. The indulgence of Italian husbands to their wives was carried to absurd lengths by Count Guiccioli, and this paved the way to the closest intimacy. Byron himself was strongly puzzled and amazed by the unnatural tolerance of the old aristocrat; one moment he half expects a stiletto in his gizzard and another he writes:—



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## *A Venetian Romance*

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“ Her husband is a polite personage, but I wish he would not carry me out in his coach and six, like Whittington and his cat.”

We soon find Byron professing to be in the throes of the deepest passion ; he loved the Countess “ most entirely,” and declared in verse :—

“ My blood is all meridian ; were it not,  
I had not left my clime, nor should I be  
In spite of tortures, ne’er to be forgot,  
A slave again of love—at least of thee.  
'Tis vain to struggle—let me perish young,  
Live as I have lived, and love as I have loved ;  
To dust if I return, from dust I sprung,  
And then at least my heart can ne’er be moved.”

However robust Byron’s declarations of his love, one’s belief in their sincerity is not strengthened by reading the coarse and vulgar passages which he uses in some of his letters about the Countess. One or two of these letters to Moore furnish some confirmation of Leigh Hunt’s statement that “ you were shocked at the licence which Byron allowed himself in his criticisms on her.” Another witness in the person of Consul-General Hoppner, who knew of the liaison from the beginning, throws doubt on the genuineness of Byron’s professions. “ It is pretty evident to me,” he wrote, “ that he at first cared little for her, however much his vanity may have been flattered on seeing the impression he had made on a young lady of rank in society so different from the other women he had known since his arrival in Venice.” There can be no sort of doubt that Byron’s passion for the lady ripened towards the close of his life. At a time when, according to the rules which

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## *A Venetian Romance*

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governed most of his intrigues, he might have been expected to throw the Countess aside, his strong passion for her was succeeded by a state of feeling as nearly akin to disinterested love as he was capable of experiencing. During the lady's illness, his solicitude and attentions were so manifest that it is not surprising to find the Countess incurring the suspicion of malingering in order to taste the experience over again. At one time he read medical treatises with a view of treating her himself. He left his books, his horses, and all the pleasures of Venice in order to be by her side, and even composed the "Prophecy" and dropped "Don Juan" at her bidding.

Although Fletcher, his valet, used to say "Any woman could manage my lord except my lady," it is certain none of them had ever before prevailed on Byron so far as to stop him scribbling what he liked. Was not Lady Caroline Lamb powerless to prevent the publication of the "Farewell"? Byron urged the Countess Guiccioli to elope with him. When Lady Caroline Lamb made a similar suggestion to the poet, he wrote a virtuous refusal. It is perhaps of little account, after all, that Byron should have written to Moore of the Countess in his usual vein of coarse gallantry; he was playing the rôle of profligate, and had he felt anything of sentiment or romance, he would have taken good care not to show it. The attachment to Countess Guiccioli, whether inspired by nothing deeper than passion as Leigh Hunt suggests or not, took such complete possession of the poet that he was restless and unhappy out of her company. He wrote her some beautiful love letters when she was on the Romagnese estates

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## *A Venetian Romance*

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with her husband, and on receiving news that she was ill, hurried at once to her side. Medwin found them quite a domesticated couple, calling one another pet names and swearing that the unfortunate Count should never claim his own. When there was a prospect of the Count locking up the lady in a convent, or taking other measures to prevent her friendship with Byron, the pair talked of going to France or America, there to settle down for life together. There is good reason to believe that the poet never wavered in his affection to the last; but up to the moment the curtain fell upon the romantic scene at Missolonghi the heart of the man remained veiled and his tongue only uttered words of bitterness.

So in this old book of the threepenny box I found the skeleton of a singular romance, and under its inspiration Byron's gallantries and his letters exercise a new and fascinating spell.



XVIII

*WAS BOSWELL A FOOL?*

“ Between ourselves he is not apt to encourage one to share reputation with himself.”

*Boswell on Dr. Johnson in a letter to the Rev. W. J. Temple.*

## XVIII

### *Was Boswell a Fool?*

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IT is surely a remarkable thing that any one with the least pretensions to a knowledge of eighteenth-century literature should continue to propagate the very misleading idea that Boswell was a fool. Macaulay's rhetorical paradoxes, legitimate as they are up to a certain point, have grievously misled a generation which passes on its traditions from hand to hand without examination or revision and never dreams of forming a first-hand opinion of its own. Many hundreds of quite intelligent readers, who pride themselves on their knowledge of books, have, in respect of two very great men—Byron and Boswell—unconsciously adopted the very plausible estimates of their genius and character that are to be found in Macaulay's Essays. There is some excuse for this display of touching confidence in the Essays. It is impossible to read Macaulay and to resist him. The splendour and the picturesqueness and the vividness of his style bear down very largely the tendency to weigh carefully the judgments and to revise the brief. Boswell has been the greater sufferer of the two men, and the very mention of his name recalls the famous saying connecting the art of biography with the vice of sycophancy and a conspicuous lack of all good taste and



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good feeling. There are doubtless people who have actually interpreted such passages as the one I am referring to literally, and who admit without dispute the absurd antithesis which seeks to set up a connection between the greatness of the book and the foolishness of its author. Sometimes they get into print, and not infrequently into books.

Whatever else he may have been—and we know he was vain and dissolute and drunken and a bad husband—Boswell was not a fool. Those who think so seem to forget that Johnson was the last man in the world to suffer fools lightly, or, indeed, to suffer them at all; that he confessed to Boswell in a letter:—

“The oftener you are seen the more you will be liked,”

that he wrote to Mrs. Boswell:—

“The only thing in which I have the honour to agree with you is in loving him,”

and that one of the last messages he despatched to Boswell in Scotland contained this passage:—

“I love you with great ardour and sincerity.”

These, you will say, are protestations of personal affection which might be inspired as much by social qualities as by intellectual eminence. In the case of some men such an explanation would be sufficient. But Johnson had too fine a reverence for intellect and wisdom, and it must not be forgotten that whenever the pair came together they never failed to discuss subjects of the deepest importance

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and seriousness. I sometimes think we are in danger perhaps of omitting to give Boswell a fair share of the credit for the great book with which his name is associated. He is regarded as the reporter, or, as Leslie Stephen called him, the "up-to-date interviewer" who jotted down the remarks of Johnson and faithfully reproduced them for our entertainment. That is taking a merely mechanical view of the functions of the biographer, and if he had done no more than this, "*The Life of Johnson*" would, to use a famous phrase, hardly stand as the finest heroic poem since the days of Homer.

Boswell laid down the lines of his "*Life of Johnson*" very early in the acquaintance, and proceeded from that moment to garner the material he required as occasion arose. It will be found by any one who looks carefully into the "*Life*" that Boswell starts by far the greatest number of the conversations, and although the introduction usually gives no clue to what the biographer himself said, and begins with some such phrase as "Questioned as to the wisdom of So-and-so, Dr. Johnson observed," we may be quite certain of one thing, that something more than idle curiosity was required to draw the great man, and that before entering as fully as he often did into controversial matters the doctor must have had his interest stirred by sound and instructive argument. This need not necessarily involve the theory that Boswell carefully prepared the topics on which he should address the doctor. Very often, of course, they arose naturally, and on the spur of the moment. But the fact that in such circumstances Boswell was able to maintain a controversy with so doughty a foe is testimony

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to his learning and ability, and in some measure to his wit.

As the result of many years' study and with the help of a friend I have drawn up a short list of some of the conversations started by Boswell. Such a list is not, so far as I know, to be found in any of the editions of the "Life." The list is as follows:—

Analysis of Johnson's Mind and Method of Discussion ; Ghosts ; Goldsmith as author. Boswell wrote, in conjunction with Mr. Dempster, a pamphlet on this subject entitled "Critical Strictures." Discusses it with Johnson—Ethics of Criticism ; Boswell defended Churchill's poetry against Johnson ; Boswell's Essay on London ; Boswell on eminent writers during Queen Anne's reign—Dr. Arbuthnot amongst others ; Boswell persuaded Voltaire to change his opinion of Johnson—a mighty clever triumph ; Miracles—Reliability of records of : Boswell quotes Hume's famous treatise, with which he was very familiar ; Preaching—drew out Johnson's famous allusions ; Bishop Berkeley's Philosophy to prove non-existence of matter ; Old question of Ethics, whether advocate is morally justified in defending a prisoner whom he knows to be guilty ; Young's "Night Thoughts" ; Purgatory and Fear of Death ; Language and English Pronunciation : Suggested new form of Pronouncing Dictionary ; Condition of Mortals in Future State ; Wealth and Proper Use of Riches ; Duelling—Whether consistent with moral duty ; Migration of Birds ; Toleration and the Propagation of Opinions ; Gray and Mason—Poems of. Boswell held them in higher esteem than Johnson did : Reasons ; Salaries of Clergy ; Garrick—Boswell's Defence of ; Music and its Effect on association of ideas ; Analysis and Translation of Poetry ; Freedom of Will and Old Problem of Individual Responsibility—Dr. Edwards on Grace ; Universal Mystery of all things ; Selfishness as motive in practice of virtue ; Conjugal Infidelity—Differed strongly from Johnson ; Relative Merits of Painting and Poetry.

It is necessary to point out that to present the remarks

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of Dr. Johnson in literary form, and in such a manner as to enable us to realise as vividly as we do the individuality of the man, his appearance, his habits, his prejudices, the vivacity and the singular charm of his company, demands something more than faithful reporting. The arts of selection and presentation must be added to the faculty for quickly apprehending the point of a debate and seizing on the dramatic quality of a dialogue.

Consider for one moment how many people exist nowadays who can convey with the fulness of its original charm and humour the conversation of a notable man, or even the spice and flavour of a bon mot. And Johnson's remarks, we may be sure, although containing the root of the matter, were not always delivered with that finish and unvarying directness which make them so remarkable in their literary dress. Mr. Chesterton was quite right when he asked us to bear in mind that these observations were poured out "like remarks on the weather or curses at a daily paper, and taken down by a man who happened to be listening."

The triumphant achievement of Boswell in being able to reproduce the salient points of Johnson's character and manners, his wit and playfulness, is in itself a flat contradiction of the statement that he was without either intellect or humour, or that he was narrow and intolerant. A man so deficient would have turned out an unreadable jumble of dogmatisms. He would never have been able to winnow the good from the bad—for Johnson, even though he was an oracle, must have spoken nonsense at times. Certainly the spirit of these talks would have evaporated; and with-

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out that note of singular frankness and simplicity what would Boswell's Life be like?

Once we are breast high in such a discussion as this, how many interesting questions arise! For instance, all readers of Johnson must have been struck by the remarkable difference between the great man's conversations and his writings—the one concise and to the point, “no big words to describe little things,” the other too often painfully solid and long drawn out. I am not going to suggest that Boswell is responsible for this great difference in style. Many men whose talk sparkles like champagne fall into labour directly they take up a pen. But it is only fair to assume that the *obiter dicta* of Johnson gained in sprightliness and freedom by passing through the brain of so acute and accomplished a man. People who nowadays laugh at the repartee of Johnson and the discomfiture of Boswell are apt to harbour a feeling of contempt for the victim, forgetting that he of his own generosity has thus increased the gaiety of nations. Rousseau says somewhere that a man, if he has to choose, will sooner do a criminal act than cover himself with ridicule. It must always remain a moot question, I suppose, whether Boswell really did deliberately write himself down an ass for the sake of making his book popular, or whether he failed altogether to see that the reader might conceivably think he was an ass. On one occasion he told Johnson that his father continued to amuse himself with “very small matters.” “I have tried this,” he continued, “but it would not do with me.” Johnson (laughing): “No, sir; it must be born with a man to be contented to take up with little things.” Now



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obviously Johnson was laughing here at the conceit of Boswell, and this was perhaps one of the few instances where the biographer failed to perceive it. But does any one imagine that Boswell, with his intelligence and rare sense of humour, was not fully conscious of the absurdity of many of the things he repeated, and the questions he addressed to Johnson? That interrogation about the baby in the castle, considering to whom it was addressed, is funnier than anything else in the book; and the incongruity of the spectacle of Johnson with a baby on his hands must have come home in full force to the lively imagination of the Scot. Boswell once professed to be melancholy because in any new state of being the sonnets of Shakespeare would not exist. A lady relieved him by observing "the first thing you will meet with in the other world will be an elegant copy of Shakespeare's works presented to you." He repeated this to Johnson, who smiled and "did not disapprove the notion"—how delicious the quiet humour of this last sentence, suggesting as it does that Boswell was quite satisfied now with the prospect of getting his Shakespeare in Paradise. Here, to my mind, you have Boswell, the conscious artist, at the back of the picture, touching up and adding a few strokes to emphasise the greatness of the central picture. For Boswell was an artist, and the sooner we get rid of the idea that he, so to speak, had this incomparable biography thrown ready made into his hands by Johnson the better.





XIX

*SOME THOUGHTS ON CHARLES LAMB*

"It is a proud as well as pleasant thing  
To hear thy good report, now borne along  
Upon the honest breath of public praise :  
We know that with the elder song of song,  
In honoring whom thou hast delighted still,  
Thy name shall keep its course to after days."

*Southey.*

## XIX

### *Some Thoughts on Charles Lamb*

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ONE cannot help thinking that Charles Lamb, with his unfailing sense of humour, would have detected a genuine sporting interest in the spectacle of three or four accomplished scholars rummaging about in the bypaths of Elizabethan literature for the source of obscure references and quotations in his writings. Mr. E. V. Lucas, Mr. Macdonald, and Mr. Craig, the Shakespearian scholar, have invested the chase with all the excitement of a missing word competition. No one would be more surprised than Elia himself, could he revisit the glimpses of the moon and see from various new editions of his works with what success he has been tracked from folio to folio, and how, even when quotation marks were absent, these vigilant students have run his wandering thoughts to earth in some dusty play or half-forgotten poem. But there is compensation for these explorers. To edit Charles Lamb thoroughly must be a liberal education in the beauties of seventeenth and eighteenth-century literature. All his essays have a flavouring of the old dramatists, of Sir Thomas Browne, of Spenser, of Milton, and with that native critical instinct that made him so delightful a guide to the best letters of his day he invariably lights upon thoughts and phrases well worth remembering. He had

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his favourite authors and his favourite quotations, and there is probably not a genuine Elian who has not adopted one or two of them.

Margaret, Duchess of Newcastle, "that princely woman, thrice noble," is a sort of King Charles's head with Lamb. He cannot shower too many eulogies on her, and when a Philistine friend borrowed the precious letters, how vehemently he protested. Lamb's collection of fine phrases is unequalled anywhere, and they seem to slip into his writings as though they had been born for no other place. Lamb never lugged in his quotations by the ears. If they came there, it was, so to speak, because he could not stop them. They leaped out on to the page. Sometimes, too, a striking phrase or a simile passed through his mind and emerged for a fitting occasion in a dress which the original author would not have despised. I always remember one fine phrase that occurs during that rather lugubrious dissertation on dying in "New Year's Eve." "Shall I," asked Lamb, "enjoy friendships there, wanting the smiling indication which point me to them here—the recognisable face—'the sweet assurance of a look.'" That sweet assurance of a look! How admirably chosen the phrase, and Lamb had really no cause to put it in quotation marks. It is as original as a great many of Pope's lines. It may have come from Matthew Roydon's *Elegy on Sir Philip Sidney*, or it may not:—

"A sweet attractive kinde of grace,  
A full assurance given by lookes,  
Continuall comfort in a face,  
The lineaments of Gospell bookes."

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Lamb was very fond of the phrase, and he used it several times. The other day the editor of a new Macaulay pointed out how the simile of the famous New Zealander (which, by the way, did not originate with Macaulay at all) so pleased the author of the *Essays* that he used it over and over again. Lamb used to give his best phrases plenty of work. The following remark of Octavius in "*Antony and Cleopatra*" was transplanted from the play to many of Elia's writings:—

" He at Philippi kept  
His sword e'en like a dancer."

Field, the schoolmaster, is described as "wielding the cane with no great goodwill—holding it 'like a dancer.'" And "Mrs. Battle, who hated your dilettante at whist, used not her good sword (her cards) 'like a dancer.'"

Who was Mrs. Battle? Many lovers of Elia have asked—and "fair Alice W——," and all the other familiar people whose identities are veiled behind bare initials in the essays? There is pretty conclusive evidence, as most of Lamb's editors have shown, that this oft-quoted lady was suggested by Sarah Burney, the wife of Rear-Admiral James Burney, at whose house Lamb and Hazlitt and many others used to play whist. Hazlitt in his essay on "*The Pleasures of Hating*" makes reference to these parties:—

"What is become of 'that set of whist-players,' celebrated by Elia in his notable *Epistle to Robert Southey, Esq.* (and now I think of it—that I myself have celebrated in this very volume), 'that for so many years called Admiral Burney friend?' They are scattered, like last year's snow. Some of them are dead, or gone to live at a distance, or pass one another in the street like strangers, or if they stop to speak, do it as coolly and try to cut one another as soon as

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possible. Some of us have grown rich, others poor. Some have got places under Government, others a niche in the 'Quarterly Review.' Some of us have dearly earned a name in the world; whilst others remain in their original privacy. We despise the one, and envy and are glad to mortify the other."

As to "Alice W——," readers will remember how in that perfect example of beautiful prose Lamb told how for "seven long years, in hope sometimes, sometimes in despair, yet persisting ever, I courted fair Alice W——n, and, as much as children could understand, I explained to them what coyness and diffidence and denial meant in maidens—when suddenly turning to Alice the soul of the first Alice looked out at her eyes with such a reality of representment that I became in doubt which of them stood there before me, or whose that bright hair was; and while I stood gazing, both the children gradually grew fainter to my view, receding and still receding till nothing at last but two mournful features were seen in the uttermost distance, which, without speech, strangely impressed upon me the effects of speech. 'We are not of Alice, nor of thee, nor are we children at all.'"

So far as Lamb's indefatigable editors have been able to ascertain there is no foundation for the statement that Lamb courted a girl for seven years. It is well known that he sacrificed himself for his sister's sake, and certainly in 1796, he wrote to Coleridge in reference to the love sonnets:—

"It is a passion of which I retain nothing. Thank God, the folly has left me for ever. Not even a review of my love verses renews one wayward wish in me."

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We have learned from Mr. John Hollingshead that subsequent to this date the actress, Miss Frances Kelly, inspired the essayist with a grand passion, and in one edition of his works the letter of proposal and Miss Kelly's reply are published. But Elia, one cannot help thinking from certain allusions in his "Bachelor's Complaint of the Behaviour of Married People," took a cynical view of matrimony. There is nothing at all to be surprised at in this. The experience of his friend Coleridge was not very encouraging. But married or not, his tender guardianship of his infirm sister is one of the most touching episodes in literature.

It is sometimes remembered against Lamb that with Swift, Johnson, Byron, and many other eminent men of letters, he had no patience with the Scotch. Their solidity and utter lack of humour got on his nerves. Swift bitingly observed that if a Scotchman's talk was not enlivened by his uncouth terms and phrases as well as accent and gesture peculiar to the country, it would be hardly tolerable. A good deal of the bitterness felt against the Scotch in the early part of the nineteenth century was due no doubt to the violence and rancour of "Blackwood" and "The Edinburgh Review." Lamb, for instance, came within the category of what was termed "The Cockney poets." The Elia attacks, however, did not excite the bitterness they would have done coming from a less lovable man; and it may be that the delicacy, raillery, and gentle sarcasm of the allusions in "Imperfect Sympathies," was thrown into the scale against the author's well-known admiration for Burns. Barry Cornwall says he once saw



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Lamb kiss his copy of Burns's poems. There were no such redeeming traits about Mr. Henley. In Mr. E. V. Lucas's valuable notes, I find the following allusion to this topic :

"Lamb's criticism of Scotchmen did not pass without comment. The pleasantest remark made upon it was that of Christopher North (John Wilson) some dozen years later (after he had met Lamb), in a 'Blackwood' paper entitled 'Twaddle on Tweedside' (May, 1833), wherein he wrote :—

" 'Charles Lamb ought really not to abuse Scotland in the pleasant way he so often does in the sylvan shades of Enfield ; for Scotland loves Charles Lamb ; but he is wayward and wilful in his wisdom, and conceits that many a Cockney is a better man even than Christopher North. But what will not Christopher forgive to Genius and Goodness ? Even Lamb bleating libels on his native land. Nay, he learns lessons of humanity, even from the mild malice of Elia, and breathes a blessing on him and his household in their Bower of Rest.' "

I now come back to the original point of these reflections. Lamb is richer in commentators than any other man of letters of his time, and the question may be asked whether, although too many editions of his works cannot be printed, there is not a danger of overdoing the craze for analysis and investigation. The inquiries into the identity of "Alice W—— and Mrs. Battle" and many other people whose doings have interested us is legitimate enough ; but the detailed explanations of certain passages, the comparisons, the verbal trivialities are apt to spoil one's enjoyment of a rich feast.

XX

*IN PRAISE OF DULNESS*

"I venerate on honest obliquity of understanding."

*Charles Lamb.*

## *In Praise of Dulness*

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I HAVE often thought that the man who neither writes himself nor is sensible of what other people write has perhaps in the long run the greatest measure of felicity. Soon after the dreadful fire in Chicago I asked a farm labourer in Yorkshire if he had read in the newspapers of the calamity. "I never read newspapers," was his reply, "and him as reads now't knaws now't," intending by the remark to suggest that his feelings were thus spared the torrent of worry over unpleasant and disagreeable things. Mr. George Gissing in "New Grub Street," and again in "The Private Papers of Henry Ryecroft," has dwelt realistically on the strain and weariness and futility of constant literary activity, and the petty jealousies and bickerings that inevitably beset the path of the man who is moderately successful with his pen. Like other writers, he turns with a feeling of envy to two classes, the non-writer and non-reader (that is, of everything except the classics and Shakespeare), and to the amiable mediocrity.

The mediocrity and the dull man may lose a great deal, but assuredly they gain something also ; and if the balance of happiness had been struck, say, between Burns and one of his fellow-ploughmen who knew nothing of poetry, and

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## *In Praise of Dulness*

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had never met Clarinda, the bard would certainly get the worst of it. Thackeray was struck by the advantages of dulness. "What a deal of grief, care, and other harmful excitement," he wrote, "does a healthy dulness and cheerful insensibility avoid. Dulness is a much finer gift than we give it credit for being."

In the literary trade, as in other walks of life, it is the merely average man with no special talents that raise him above his fellows who has most friends, and gets most enjoyment out of life. An endowment of cheerful insensibility is invaluable, and this is precisely the quality which will be found lacking in most literary men. They, who are least able to bear them, write and say the hardest things of one another. How sorely Keats was wounded by Byron's sneer about his gallipots every one knows. Shelley remembered that when he wrote those exquisite lines :—

"He has outsoared the shadows of our night,  
Envy and hate and calumny and pain. . . ."

Byron hurled his bolts at the critics recklessly, and professed to regard their verdicts on himself and his work with complete indifference. But no one reading his letters can ever doubt of his extreme sensibility and vanity. The brave show of being otherwise was merely of a piece with those studied histrionics that began the moment he sailed away from England.

Hazlitt speaks of the penalties that beset the man who breaks away from the quiet and uneventful shades of mediocrity to essay distinction in letters. There seems to me more than a mere suspicion of resemblance between

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this lively piece of writing and a paper of Dr. Johnson's in "The Rambler," on "The Dangers and Miseries of a Literary Eminence." They both exhibit with great humour and naturalness the disturbing obligations that descend on the man who presumes to be cleverer than his friends. Dr. Johnson, writing in an imaginary character, says:—

"I naturally love to talk without much thinking, to scatter my merriment at random, and to relax my thoughts with ludicrous remarks and fanciful images; but such is now the importance of my opinion that I am afraid to offer it, lest, by being established too hastily into a maxim, it should be the occasion of error to half the nation; and such is the expectation with which I am attended, when I am going to speak, that I frequently pause to reflect whether what I am about to utter is worthy of myself."

Hazlitt's experience, whether imaginary or not, corresponded exactly with Johnson's, and how many writers have not discovered since that the world always insists on a man's living up to his pretensions even in the smallest affairs. The author of "Table Talk" thus explains his position:—

"I must occasionally lie fallow. The kind of conversation I affect most is what sort of a day it is, and whether it is likely to rain or hold up fine for to-morrow. . . . I would resign myself to this state of easy indifference, but I find I cannot. I must maintain a certain pretension which is far enough from my wish. I must be put on my defence, I must take up the gauntlet continually or I find I lose ground. . . . While I am thinking what o'clock it is, or how I came to blunder in quoting a well-known passage as if I had done it on purpose, others are thinking whether I am not really as dull a fellow as I am sometimes said to be."

It was continually thrown in his teeth that he was an author; and while Hazlitt complains that even at cribbage

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his friends supposed this entitled them to peg a hole or two in the game, Johnson's fame cost him in one week, "two hogsheads of port, fifteen gallons of arrack, ten dozen of claret, and five and forty bottles of champagne."

There is something to be said on the other side. A writer whom the public is disposed to accept so far on his own valuation can venture further than the average man in most subjects, and boldness and assurance will often enough serve as an excellent cloak for ignorance. Few men have the candour of Dr. Johnson, who, when asked by the old lady why he had described "pastern" as "the knee of a horse" in his dictionary, replied briefly, "Ignorance, madam, sheer ignorance!"

The mere fact of a man's writing at all is indisputably a recommendation to the respect if not to the admiration of the public. He becomes at once a person of some distinction. In that terribly depressing book of Mr. Gissing's to which I have referred—"New Grub Street"—Carter, the hospital secretary, a merely common-place creature with no brains to speak of, condescends to treat Reardon, his clerk, as more of an equal when he finds out that he has written a novel. His distant manner and chilly patronage evaporate for a smiling affability tempered by a certain awe of the man's powers.

The merit of being able to write has been grossly exaggerated by those who regard printed matter as the most significant thing in the world. After all, it is nothing of the kind. One cannot help sharing Carlyle's admiration of his father because he built a house with his own hands. Macaulay declared in an ecstasy of literary devotion that



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if he were offered a kingdom and a crown on condition that he gave up reading he would refuse them and keep his books. The hypothetical offer was not a fair one, kingdoms and crowns being notoriously as harassing as writing ; but the world contains many things more desirable than books, and it is a silly affectation not openly to acknowledge it. As a wise man has said, it is better to be able neither to read nor write than to be able to do nothing else. But it is a fine thing to be a scratch man at golf. A dullard may fail to comprehend the philosophy of the ancients or feel the magic power of Shakespeare's sonnets. That does not argue him dead to the substantial things of Nature. An "impulse from a vernal wood" may reach him in spite of his artistic limitations. The dull man, the non-reading man, moreover is far likelier to make both himself and other people happy because he is in a big majority.

Let the dull man rejoice ; he is far happier than he wots of.



XXI

*THE CHILDREN OF BOOKS*

"Children are like soldiers; they have their days off duty."

*Ruskin*

*The Children of Books*

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WHEN Mr. Swinburne, in his famous article on Dickens, remarked that Little Nell was an inhuman prodigy—the sort of creature that is matched in physical abnormality by a baby with two heads—he touched on what is undoubtedly one of the most striking limitations of the master's art. All his children are miracles of pathos or of humour, but they are never really alive.

A very fascinating chapter might be written about the Child in Fiction. How many of our great novelists have given us children of real flesh and blood, and not strange examples of awful precosity artfully posed for our sympathy or our laughter? Very few indeed. And there is nothing surprising in this when you remember that the mere fact of bringing a child into fiction at all, and giving it a substantial part to play in any human story, is in a sense raising it out of its own rank of childhood and setting it among the Olympians. The majority of children are happily normal, and the normal child has rarely begun to think and is nearly always free from sentiment. But in the novel how different. There seems to be an essential quality of some kind in the essence of childhood which is never

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recaptured by upgrown men and women, and the result is we get only a feeble reflection of the glory of those days. The Child of Fiction is almost always a little Hero or a little Sinner, and in any case he (or she) is clever and self-conscious, and must be eternally on exhibition.

It does not follow that a fondness for children and an intimacy with their ways will enable a writer to draw a perfectly convincing child, or both Dickens and Hawthorne would have succeeded much better than they did.

In reviewing the children who, because of the places they occupy in the Story Books of the World, may be fitly named Little Immortals, that strange, fantastic, unworldly little sprite, Pearl, of "The Scarlet Letter," trips at once on to our page. "Little Pearl," like "Donatello," who has something of the same unearthly witchery about him, stands apart from all the children of books. She is a wild, elfish fairy, who belongs only by right to that mysterious shadowland in which Hester Prynne and Arthur Dimmesdale played out the tragedy of their fate. Hawthorne, in his endeavour to create a child whose wild temperament and disposition should partake of the evil passion which had given it birth, and thereby heighten the retribution of the unhappy mother, stepped outside all natural bounds, and made of "Pearl" a little devil, or at any rate a creature only half human and old far beyond her years. At the same time no lover of Hawthorne would have Little Pearl other than she is, for the sufficient reason that she belongs to the sombre picture of New England Puritanism; and as in the meeting between Hester and the minister in the forest her gay personality supplies a

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necessary touch of colour that brings out in all its intensity the overpowering pathos of that masterly scene. There is no more dramatic chapter in the whole of American fiction than the one describing Hester's attempt to rid herself of the Scarlet Letter and her detection by the child. But we feel that there is some demoniacal force which has nothing in common with the simple, unaffected nature of childhood, compelling her to add still further torture to the broken woman she calls mother. Every one remembers that picture of Pearl, standing over the brook watching the discarded letter, the badge of shame, floating away on the waters :—

“ Seen in the brook once more was the shadowy wraith of Pearl's image crowned and girdled with flowers, but stamping its foot, wildly gesticulating, and in the midst of all, still pointing its small fore-finger at Hester's bosom.”

No real child of seven this, one exclaims—but merely the form and figure of a child designed by the author to suit his purpose, which was to intensify the bitterness of that retributive process. Hawthorne's characters have all more or less the same indefinable touch of mystery, and to encounter little Phœbe, the angel of that dull House of the Seven Gables, is to recognise in her something akin to the fine-souled Hilda, the heroine of “The Marble Faun,” or the rich, voluptuous Zenobia in “The Blithedale Romance.” Phœbe, however, in her best moments, is a quite natural and delightful child, whose progress to womanhood we watch with a touching solicitude, rejoicing that at last she should fall into the hands of the loving Holgrave.



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Dickens's children afford unlimited material for such a causerie as this. Who does not know intimately one or other of that famous gallery comprising David Copperfield, Paul Dombey, Oliver Twist, Little Nell, Little Emily, Master Bardell, Smike, and The Artful Dodger? Yet all of them, with perhaps the single exception of Copperfield (and he is a bit of a plaster saint), are not, in the real sense of the word, normal children; they are brought into the picture by virtue of some singular quality that makes them either humorous or pathetic; and away from the glamour of the limelight we should accept them only as caricatures. Little Emily and Little Nell are obviously not for this world—Heaven is their home. The same may be said of Paul, and David Copperfield. Copperfield, although he shows manliness enough on both occasions when fortune goes against him, is eternally using his pocket-handkerchief. Micawber's tears, for example, we can understand. They are of the crocodile variety, but Copperfield, then a boy of eighteen, loses some part of his manliness by crying at the sight of Agnes:—

“She looked so quiet and good, and reminded me so strongly of my airy, fresh school-days at Canterbury, and the sodden, smoky, stupid wretch I had been the other night; that, nobody being by, I yielded to my self-reproach and shame—and in short, made a fool of myself. I cannot deny that I shed tears.”

Copperfield, in short, makes a luxury of woe. Thackeray has drawn children better probably than any of the last-century novelists; and “Pendennis,” which is as largely biographical as “Copperfield,” contains one of the sincerest pictures of childhood to be found within the

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## *The Children of Books*

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covers of a book. Thackeray's rebellion against the early Victorian convention which forbade the novelist to dwell too intimately on the temptations of youth is set forth in his preface :—

“ Many ladies have remonstrated, and subscribers left me, because in the course of the story I described a young man resisting and affected by temptation. My object was to say that he had passions to face, and the manliness and generosity to overcome them.”

Pen's little vulgarities of dress and manner, that almost invariably mark the transition of youth to that state of adolescence bordering on manhood ; his selfishness, and rudeness to his mother and sister, and above all that inimitable calf love affair with the Fotheringay of the Theatre Royal, are among the traits that add to the reality of the picture. Every one can truly say that they have met and known dozens of such boys, whose hearts were in the right place, though they looked to it that their handkerchiefs were not too frequently employed. But if we are to name the one boyish character of Thackeray's of whom it can be said that he is free altogether from the attitudinising and sham sentimentalities of the ordinary hero of fiction, it would be “ Henry Esmond, Esq.”—perhaps the greatest boy in the realm of fiction, not forgetting even Tom Brown. Thackeray, so certain of his ground when he is dealing with boys, declines on to the lower plane altogether when he has to depict feminine juvenility. Compare Sophia Western with that insipid creature Amelia, who lay crying in bed over Lieutenant Osborne ; a silly, commonplace schoolgirl, incapable of arousing one little bit of sympathy. Young Rawdon Crawley makes a striking contrast.

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I have mentioned Sophia Western, and there is another girl character in fiction not unworthy to take a place beside the heroine of Fielding's immortal book. How much of the charm of "Silas Marner" is due to the sunshine of Effie's presence! Here is a real mischievous child, requiring to be petted and smacked and loved, neither too good nor too bad, but just an ordinary human baby, such a one as inspired Whittier's lines:—

"A dreary place would be this earth  
Were there no little people in it;  
The song of life would lose its mirth  
Were there no children to begin it."

Whenever one thinks of Effie, there is recalled that inimitable description of the first and last punishment that the old weaver ever inflicted on his adopted daughter. It is one of the most natural incidents in any book:—

"'Naughty, naughty Effie,' he suddenly began, holding her on his knee, and pointing to her muddy feet and clothes—'naughty to cut with the scissors and run away. Effie must go into the coal-hole for being naughty. Daddy must put her in the coal-hole.'

"For a moment there was silence, but then came a little cry, 'Opy, opy!' and Silas let her out again, saying: 'Now, Effie 'ull never be naughty again, else she must go in the coal-hole—a black, naughty place.'

"In half-an-hour she was clean again, and Silas having turned his back to see what he could do with the linen band, threw it down again with the reflection that Effie would be good without fastening for the rest of the morning. He turned round again, and was going to place her in her little chair near the loom when she peeped out at him with black face and hands again, and said: 'Effie in de toal-hole!'"

Tom Tulliver and Fred Vincy are both drawn by the same master hand, and George Eliot, almost alone among

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women novelists, showed that she understood little boys as well as little girls. Then I might write also of those incomparable boys, Tom Jones and Roderick Random, both rollicking, roystering types, who belong to an age of their own. Roderick Random, however, has his disciples among the "scallywags" of the twentieth century. "I was often," he writes, "inhumanely scourged for crimes I did not commit; because, having the character of a vagabond in the village, every piece of mischief whose author lay unknown was charged upon me."



XXII

*SOME FAMOUS PLAGIARISMS*

“The author who imitates his predecessors only by furnishing himself with thoughts and elegancies out of the same general magazine of literature, can with little more propriety be reproached as a plagiary than the architect can be censured as a mean copier of Angelo or Wren because he digs his marble from the same quarry, squares his stones by the same art, and unites them in columns of the same orders.”

*Dr. Johnson*



## XXII

### *Some Famous Plagiarisms*

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**A**MONG the most notorious plagiarists in the world, we must place some of the first of our poets. Generally speaking, where the greatest similarities of expression appear, the themes are as old as the hills, and great minds have agreed to clothe a common idea in the same dress.

There occurs to the mind at once a striking instance of two distinguished men lighting on the same image and phrases. Everybody knows the well-known lines in Fitzgerald's version of Omar Khayyám :—

“The moving Finger writes, and having writ,  
Moves on, nor all your Piety nor Wit  
Can lure it back to cancel half a line,  
Nor all your tears wash out a word of it.”

Longfellow, who never saw the *Rubáiyát* (for Fitzgerald's translation has only become popular within the last thirty years), has the following lines in one of his fugitive pieces :—

“Whatever hath been written shall remain,  
Nor be erased, nor written o'er again ;  
The unwritten only still belongs to thee—  
Take heed, and ponder well what that shall be.”

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## *Some Famous Plagiarisms*

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Shakespeare stole with both hands, but to vary the epitaph which Johnson passed on Goldsmith, it might be written that "he stole nothing which he did not adorn." Many poets and writers have since his day been largely indebted to Shakespeare. To give only one example which comes to the lips—Jack Falstaff's description of Justice Shallow :—

"I do remember this same Justice at Clement's Inn, like a man made after supper of a cheese paring; he was, for all the world, like a forked radish with a head fantastically carved upon it with a knife."

Who does not recall at once Carlyle's phrase :—

"A forked radish, with head fantastically carved."

written down, by the way, without inverted commas?

Some writers—Charles Lamb is a well-known example—become so steeped in the literature of one period that their work not only acquires the flavour of that period, but they adopt whole phrases and images unconsciously into their vocabulary. Mr. E. V. Lucas, in his introduction to Lamb, has given an entertaining account of his efforts to disentangle what is really Lamb's own work from what he incorporated from the sixteenth and seventeenth-century dramatists. Goldsmith was a ready and most ingenious adapter of other men's thoughts, yet in every case he made excellent use of his material. There is the well-known instance concerning the lines from "The Hermit" which are quoted everywhere :—

"Man wants but little here below;  
Nor wants that little long."

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## *Some Famous Plagiarisms*

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It was Young who wrote :—

“ Man wants but little nor that little long.”

Pope's verse abounds in phrases which he took from other poets, and by a felicitous touch rendered unforgettable. The lines often quoted, and more often than not quoted wrongly, may be cited as a case in point :—

“ Form'd by thy converse happily to steer  
From grave to gay, from lively to severe.”

Dryden has it as follows :—

“ Happy who in his verse can gently steer  
From grave to light, from pleasant to severe.”

And Boileau had his version :—

“ Heureux qui, dans ses vers, sait d'une voix legere  
Passer du grave au doux, du plaisant au sévère.”

This can be likened only to the case of one of Johnson's papers in “ *The Rambler* ” which was pilfered by a French author, and afterwards translated from the French into English again.

An author will sometimes reproduce in many varied forms a type of character which has been suggested to him by the writings of another, and though the treatment in such case may vary according to the temperament and style of the writer, fundamentally the points of difference are small. The writings of Chateaubriand and Byron furnish a parallel of the kind. There is no doubt that René is the counterpart of the long line of what Macaulay described as “ mysterious, unhappy, Lara-like Peers ”—the Childe

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## *Some Famous Plagiarisms*

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Harolds, Conrads, Laras, Manfreds, etc., and the author of the "*Génie du Christianisme*" was piqued that the English lord should have forgotten to make any substantial acknowledgment. "Was I then," he asks in his "*Memoirs*," "one of those fathers whom men deny when they have attained to power? Can Lord Byron have been completely ignorant of me when he quotes almost all the French authors who are his contemporaries? Did he never hear speak of me, when the English papers, like the French papers, have resounded a score of times in his hearing with controversies on my works, when the '*New Times*' drew a parallel between the author of the '*Génie du Christianisme*' and the author of '*Childe Harold*'?" As a matter of fact, Byron did mention Chateaubriand, although in a work which the latter probably never saw. The following occurs in Stanza XVI of "*Age of Bronze*":—

"There Metternich, power's foremost parasite,  
Cajoles; there Wellington forgets to fight;  
There Chateaubriand forms new books of martyrs;  
And subtle Greeks intrigue for stupid Tartars."

There is the notorious case of Robert Montgomery, the poet, whose dealings with the work of others drew from Macaulay one of the most scathing reviews of modern times. Shakespeare has said that—

"Every true man's apparel fits your thief."

"It is by no means the case," says the author of the essay in the "*Edinburgh Review*," "that every true poet's similitude fits your plagiarist." Perhaps the most remarkable coincidence, to apply a polite term, between the work

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## *Some Famous Plagiarisms*

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of Montgomery and a brother poet occurs in the poem on the Omnipresence of the Deity. Lord Byron wrote :—

“ Time writes no wrinkle on thine azure brow ; ”

and Montgomery's version is as follows :—

“ And thou vast ocean, on whose awful face  
Time's iron feet can print no ruin-trace.”

Macaulay's satire was let loose on the unhappy Montgomery over the mutilation of those lines from Scott's “ Lord of the Isles ” :—

“ The dew that on the violet lies,  
Mocks the dark lustre of thine eyes.”

Montgomery has the following :—

“ And the bright dew-bead on the bramble lies  
Like liquid rapture upon beauty's eyes.”

The paragraph in which Macaulay gibbets the plagiarists is worth reproducing, because it embodies a very wholesome moral for the benefit of the clumsy adapter :—

“ Dew on a bramble is no more like a woman's eyes than the dew anywhere else. There is a very pretty Eastern tale, of which the fate of plagiarists often reminds us. The slave of a magician saw his master wave his wand, and heard him give orders to the spirits who arose at the summons. The slave stole the wand, and waved it himself in the air ; but he had not observed that his master used the left hand for that purpose. The spirits thus irregularly summoned tore the thief to pieces instead of obeying his orders. There are very few who can safely venture to conjure with the rod of Sir Walter ; and Mr. Robert Montgomery is not one of them.”

Macaulay himself was not above appropriating a good image when he had the chance. His famous New Zealander,



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in the essay on Ranke's "History of the Popes," was taken from Voleny's "Ruins," and the same idea occurs in a letter of Horace Walpole's.

A quite modern example may also be given. How many readers familiar with the philosophy of William Ernest Henley :—

"I am the captain of my Soul,  
I am the Master of my Fate."

remember that Tennyson wrote in "Idylls of the King"?—

"Smile and we smile, the lords of many lands.  
Frown and we smile, the lords of our own hands;  
For Man is Man and Master of his Fate."

But who would be so bold as to say that both Tennyson and Henley were not in the first place indebted to Shakespeare, that repository of thoughts and ideas for every situation and mood in life? Cassius, addressing Brutus, says :—

"Men at some time are master of their Fates.  
The fault, dear Brutus, is not in our stars,  
But in ourselves, that we are underlings."

Burns, as is well-known, read "Tristram Shandy"; it was one of the few good books in his father's small library. Did he, I wonder, receive from Sterne's work the inspiration for the lines :—

"The rank is but the guinea's stamp,  
The man's the gow'd for a' that."

In the dedication of "Tristram Shandy" to "A Great Man," Sterne says :—

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## *Some Famous Plagiarisms*

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"Honours like impressions upon coin, may give an ideal and local value to a bit of base metal, but Gold and Silver will pass all the world over, without any other recommendation than their own weight."

It was La Bruyère who declared that we had come into the world too late to produce anything new, and that description and sentiment had long been exhausted. Horace complained in his day that it was difficult to discover an original theme. Dr. Johnson, whose sayings many men have plagiarised, wrote an interesting paper in "The Rambler" on this very subject. The doctor had no sympathy with those people who are eternally seeking to discover points of resemblance between the works of different writers in order to establish a case of theft. It is certain, he says, that whoever attempts any common topic will find unexpected coincidences of his thoughts with those of other writers; "nor can the nicest judgment always distinguish accidental similitude from artful imitation."

Johnson, of course, would have differentiated between, say, Montgomery's adaptations of Scott and Pope's borrowings from his contemporaries. For he adds later on, in the same essay, that no writer ought to be convicted of imitation "except there is a concurrence of more resemblance than can be imagined to have happened by chance." He would not excuse a man where "the same ideas are conjoined without any natural series or necessary coherence, or where not only the thought, but the words, are copied." There is such an instance in Pope, and as the lines are so well known, it may be given:—

"This modest stone, what few vain marbles can,  
May truly say—Here lies an honest man."



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## *Some Famous Plagiarisms*

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Crashaw is clearly copied here. He wrote :—

“ This plain floor,  
Believe me, reader, can say more  
Than many a braver marble can—  
Here lies a truly honest man.”

Instances of plagiarism and open piracy might be multiplied from all times and from all departments of literature. Everything that is successful is certain to be imitated. Defoe wept over the number of bogus “ Robinson Crusoes ” that sprang up, mushroom-like, in a night, and the finicking old bookseller, Richardson, has left it on record that “ The publication of the ‘ History of Pamela ’ gave birth to no less than 16 Pieces, as Remarks, Imitations, Retailings of the Story, Pyracies, etc., etc.”

XXIII

*THE IMPORTANCE OF THE RIGHT  
WORD*

“ Don't, sir, accustom yourself to use big words for little matters.”  
*Dr. Johnson to Boswell.*

## *The Importance of the Right Word*

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**H**ALF the effectiveness of good writing and good talk lies in the happy facility for getting the right word. We are continually in the mood for catching modish innovations on established forms of speech and decrying any word or phrase that falls below the ever-changing standard of polite conversation. Euphemisms are the fashion both in speaking and writing. Indeed, if it were not for an occasional slang word or two our everyday vocabulary would soon be as dull and spiritless as an early Victorian novel. Yet how stimulating is the bold and expressive speech of the Elizabethans! In those days men's talk had some body and substance in it.

Let any one who wishes to realise to what an extent our tongue has been emasculated by this modern affectation of politeness read through the first part of "King Henry IV," and some of Jack Falstaff's speeches in the second part. It will be like a breath of fresh air on a spring morning. There is one passage in the reply of the grand old Knight to the Chief Justice that serves partly to illustrate the point I am trying to make. "If," exclaims the Knight, "it be a hot day, and I brandish anything but my bottle, I would I might never spit white again!"

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## *The Importance of the Right Word*

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President Roosevelt was present at a meeting of a railroad directorate at which it was proposed to issue a notice requiring passengers not to "expectorate" on the floors of the cars. "Oh! Make it 'spit,'" said Mr. Roosevelt, "that's a good old English word!" "Expectorate" is a great word with the ultra-fastidious. It has had a good innings, during the last few years, and the medical profession especially are fond of it. Falstaff, of course, could never have "expectorated"; but Shakespeare evidently did not think the word "spit" crude or unladylike or he would never have allowed Lucentio to use it in the presence of Bianca. The lover's remark to the musician was, "Oh fie! The treble jars, spit in the hole, man, and tune again!"

A passion for gentility which reduces its victim to the level of a mere automaton whose talk is prescribed for him, parrotwise, usually lies at the root of this distressing love of euphemism. When Bob Acres adopted a new style of swearing in "The Rivals"—"odds triggers and flints," etc.—he declared to Absolute "'tis genteel, isn't it. . . . There is no meaning in the common oaths, and nothing but their antiquity makes them respectable. . . . The best terms will grow obsolete. Damns have had their day!"

But Acres was a snob, and the same degree of enthusiasm which he exhibited for this new style of imprecation would have been expended on a current fashion in periwigs or a novel thing in ruffs. It had nothing to do with a feeling for the right word which is above everything else the chiefest concern in the equipment of a literary man's mind.

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## *The Importance of the Right Word*

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To most people one word is just as good as another. That is why most people can never hope to appreciate good writing. At the same time it is not altogether untrue to say that some of the best terms and phrases become over-worked and require, like an old pipe, to be put away for a rest. But there are others which, used in the right conjunction and environment, have no substitutes. They alone must be used to express certain ideas and convey certain images. Shakespeare has a sovereign manner with words ; but occasionally his liking for a long procession of adjectives causes him to slip into bathos, to sound a false jarring note. There is that notable phrase in "Hamlet"—"remorseless, treacherous, lecherous, kindless villain." "Kindless" coming after so many strong adjectives sounds weak and ineffective ; it affects one with the chill of an anti-climax.

There are evidences throughout the plays that Shakespeare was ever on the alert to maintain these nice distinctions in the interchange of words, and that he had an eye for their right values. Doll Tearsheet, in language which with all our desire for a return to a more primordial vocabulary we cannot approve, declares :—

" Hang him, rogue ! He lives upon mouldy stewed prunes and dried cakes. A captain ! these villains will make the word ' captain ' as odious as the word ' occupy ' ; which was an excellent good word before it was ill-assorted : therefore captains had need look to it."

Every one knows of many words that have lost their original virtue by misuse, or been corrupted by bad company until the writer of taste refuses to find them employ-

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## *The Importance of the Right Word*

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ment at all. Usually they are driven to the gates of the illiterate. Many words and phrases fall by dint of their own good service; we tire of them, and then after a short, sharp struggle they are cast adrift. "Humour" is a sixteenth and seventeenth-century word that seems to have been a sort of King Charles's head with the dramatists; they could never keep it out of their plays. It fell away from grace, and now stands in a modern sense for something very different indeed from caprice or behaviour. When one older word drops out of favour, there are always plenty ready to step into its place, most of them nowadays French, and often poor substitutes for the original. A really fine full-blooded word will swim into our ken now and again. I recall such a one during the Boer war—"disgruntled"; a word then revived, and still in use, which is quite Shakespearean in its expressiveness, and fitted exactly to pin to a beaten and discomfited party. The great European war has yielded a word that it is safe to say will cling to English currency for many years—the verb "to strafe." Of such words one may say with Bardolph:—

"I will maintain the word with my sword to be a soldier-like word, and a word of exceeding good command, by heaven."

Into the mouth of Falstaff Shakespeare put a great many words that, like the language of Hudibras and Swift, can hardly escape a modern censorship. But he also supplied his much-beloved Knight with patches of comic dialogue that for force and picturesqueness have never been equalled in the tongue. That burst of indignation



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in "The Wives" after the buck-basket incident is inimitable:—

"The rogues slighted me into the river with as little remorse as they would have drowned a bitch's blind puppies, fifteen i' the litter; and you may know by my size, that I have a kind of alacrity in sinking; if the bottom were as deep as hell, I should down."

The use of the phrase "A kind of alacrity" is a stroke of Shakespearean genius, and the whole scene belongs emphatically to the region described by Dr. Johnson as peculiarly belonging to the poet, where "there is a conversation above grossness and below refinement, where propriety resides."

This, as a matter of fact, is the middle circle where very often the right word will be found, and most great writers and poets have not hesitated to draw liberally upon it. Slang—or words which by common usage are regarded as slang words—are not always to be despised by the picturesque writer, though only a man of taste and judgment should be allowed to deal in them. It is a curious fact, and will interest those people who like to inquire into the derivation of words, that many effective phrases employed by Shakespeare and the Elizabethans are now in current use as slang. Some of these phrases deserve a better fate than to be cast out of the circles of polite conversation, for they are incontestably of legitimate use; they best describe a certain thought or idea. The great and increasing army of borrowers have long been known to the world of fashion and to the street as "touchers," and Shakespeare sanctioned the employment of the phrase in this connection. In "Timon" a servant, after vainly

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## *The Importance of the Right Word*

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trying to raise the wind by asking loans from Timon's friends, reports :—

“ My Lord,  
They have all been touched and found base metal ;  
For they have all denied.”

What other word would embody so effectively the form of solicitation here suggested—not the ordinary kind of solicitation, but a crafty and cunning and diplomatic form of appeal. You do not, of course, touch a friend who lends you money freely, and whom you intend to repay. The man who “ touches ” is a subtle, designing creature with all his wits about him. Shakespeare has other expressive words that may be found in any English slang dictionary, whither they might on occasion be rescued. Falstaff uses by far the most of them, and one I recall in “*The Merry Wives*” that is not unknown on racecourses. It is to “ hedge,” and it occurs in a dialogue with Pistol, who to the disgust of the Knight discovers that he has honourable and conscientious motives against the delivery of one of Falstaff's letters. Falstaff is indignant :—

“ I, I, I, myself sometimes, leaving the fear of Heaven on the left hand, and hiding mine honour in my necessity, am fain to shuffle, to hedge, and to lurch ; and yet, you rogue, will esconce your rags, your cat-a-mountain looks, your red-lattice phrases, and your bold-beating oaths under the shelter of your honour ! ”

The right word, let it be said, finally, is always the simplest, the least ostentatious, the least pretentious.

XXIV

*THE SOULS OF HOUSES*

" We can die out of many houses, but the house itself can die but once, and so real is the life of a house to one who has dwelt in it—more especially the life of a house which held him in dreamy infancy ; in restless boyhood ; in passionate youth—so real, I say, is its life that it seems as if something like a soul of it must outlast its perishing frame."

*Oliver Wendell Holmes.*

" While yet a boy I sought for ghosts, and sped  
Thro' many a listening chamber, cave and ruin,  
And starlight wood, with fearful steps pursuing  
Hopes of high talk with the departed dead."

*Shelley.*

*The Souls of Houses*

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**A**BOUT midway along the pleasant winding lane which links a Yorkshire village to one of the busiest highways in the county is a dismal two-storeyed cottage, with a long, straggling garden in front. The cottage is unoccupied, and this bleak winter afternoon it has about it that overpowering sense of desolation and pathos which seems to belong to isolated country spots that show some signs of human activity only newly withdrawn. The spectacle of a house to let in a town or city scarcely touches the imagination at all. If it is set in a row of houses of similiar pattern then it absorbs warmth and vitality from its surroundings; it shares in the bustle and turmoil of the "next door," and the full tide of the day's traffic rolls up to its dingy steps. It has its place in the commonwealth of the street. It is no more forlorn in winter than in summer because the influences of nature, of the wind and the sun are hardly perceptible in its environment. Perhaps it is a trifle melancholy looking on a dripping November afternoon, in that twilight moment before the pale yellow lights of the lamps stream on to the splashy gutters, and the first glimpse of its neighbours' fires are visible through the gloom. Then the town house is always kept human by the play of the children round

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## *The Souls of Houses*

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about its walls. The little dwellers in pent-up streets, whose movements are strictly prescribed by anxious mothers, sprawl noisily over the doorsteps and clamber on to the window-sills of the empty house. Here is sanctuary from the scolding tongue of the Olympians; and if by chance any door be left open, what a world of exploration spreads itself out before the tiny feet!

This faint note of melancholy and regret which is so often induced by the sight of an empty human habitation is, of course, more often than not connected with the age and situation of the place. It might be difficult, perhaps, for the imagination to weave romantic dreams about a half-crown jerry-built tenement down a back street. But a house, however plebeian in its origin, however unpoetic its surroundings, is not destitute of the romantic quality, provided some one has lived there. The sight of a room in which we have spent any length of time will bring a flood of tender memories and faint regrets. On certain spots are accretions of ourselves—corners that hold the record of misery and pain. To what extent these influences are felt is wholly a matter of temperament and imagination. The man with a lively and fertile fancy derives the greatest pleasure from the contemplation of old scenes; but he is also made to feel their sadness in a more poignant degree.

I have been alluding, of course, to houses in which the observer has lived himself, or which possess for him some deep and tender associations. When it comes to the detached and impersonal point of view, the presence of romance in a ruined or empty house is determined by the situation of the place, or by a sense of personality that



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seems to hover about the building. The old great house, Blakesmoor, in H—shire, which Charles Lamb found, much to his grief, in ruins, diffused an enduring magic that coloured many of his dreams. His wanderings through its stately rooms when a boy were responsible for that quaint and always delightful dissertation on gentility :—

“ To have a feeling of gentility it is not necessary to have been born gentle. The pride of ancestry may be had on cheaper terms than to be obliged to an importunate race of ancestors ; and the coatless antiquary in his unemblazoned cell, revolving the long line of Mowbray or De Clifford's pedigrees, at the sounding names may warm himself into as gay a vanity as those who do inherit them.”

Some parts of the North are rich in great and ruined old manor houses of the Elizabethan type—houses that stand in the loveliest surroundings, and have each what I am daring enough to call a soul and individuality. One that I particularly remember is now tumbling into ruins, and part of it serves as a cowshed. By the simple folk in the neighbourhood it is regarded with deep-rooted dislike, not unmixed with awe ; for there are strange stories of rappings and clanking chains, and mysterious apparitions. This reputation, it must be confessed, is not wholly undeserved. Some ancient houses have the aspect of a large and healthy benevolence ; they suggest the flowing wassail, and a boundless hospitality of far-off days. They are robustious and jolly ; an air of solid comfort dwells about their richly timbered roofs. Very different is the impression left on the mind by a walk through the house I have in mind. One is chilled and disturbed in some strange and unexplained way by the atmosphere of the place. A sinister



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air pervades everything, and though it be a warm summer's day, a fit of shivering creeps over one.

George Macdonald, whose poems on haunted houses have an unusually realistic note, must have encountered such a building when he wrote :—

“Mark how it looks ! It must have a soul,  
It looks as though it cannot stir ;  
See the ribs of it how they stare !  
Its blind eyes yet have a seeing air ;  
It knows it has a soul ! ”

This suggestion of the working of some maleficent influence, which has, as it were, by a process of evil alchemy impregnated the very stones of the house with the odour of decay and death, makes the reading of “The House with the Seven Gables” a fascinating and terrifying ordeal. In the hands of Nathaniel Hawthorne, the musty and dry-rotted old home of the Pyncheon ancestry is something more than the *mise en scène* of the story ; it is a personality that enters into the texture of the living characters, and becomes the mainspring of their acts. It is an ogre that withers up the happiness of every one within those ancient walls. The young daguerreotypist, full of hope and vitality, feels this enervating influence, and makes wild and extravagant protests against the craze for hereditary houses. “Morbid influences,” he says, “in a thousand-fold variety gather about hearths, and pollute the life of households. There is no such inhuman atmosphere as that of an old home rendered poisonous by one's defunct forefathers and relatives.”

I recall another house with a strange and mysterious

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past. It lies on the fringe of a bustling Northern city, and within recent years clusters of prosperous villas have gathered about its feet. It was built at no later date than the beginning of last century, but for fifty years it has only been occupied at short and infrequent intervals. No tenant ever stayed more than a few months. And when the matter came to be investigated there was no suggestion of any ghostly or supernatural phenomena; but the atmosphere of the place was intensely depressing, as if all the sadness and gloom of generations had crystallised in its walls. The jolly and robustious guest failed to exorcise this spirit of gloom, and consequently the house stands eternally to let, and the mischievous boys of the place not daring to venture through the gates, occasionally send a fusilade of stones into the neglected garden.

In the course of time houses will acquire distinct and clearly marked characteristics, reflecting, as it were, the peculiarities of their occupiers; and these are not obliterated all at once. There are houses that flaunt themselves brazenly before the world, just as there are houses of a modest and retiring nature. It is not merely the brick and mortar that gives a distinctive character to a house; the architect and the builder merely supply the shell. Some women, and a few men, possess the hidden gift which enables them to impress themselves and their personality on a new house almost immediately. Others, too, by genius for practical arrangement and a trick of bringing out the hidden capabilities of things, contrive to impart a glow of comfort to a house that has hitherto been bare and uninviting.

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## *The Souls of Houses*

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The old cottage to which I have referred is a striking memorial of the old man who occupied it for forty years. He died at the age of eighty of a chill caught during a tramp home on a wet, cold night. He was by profession a dancing master, the oldest in the North, whose recollections went back to the stately days of early Victorian ballrooms ; and twice a week he gave his lessons to a circle of pupils in the city. His real interests in later years, however, were in the village. He had a strong artistic bent with what, without exaggerating, may be described as an amazing versatility ; he painted dozens of water-colours, superintended amateur theatricals, wrote antiquarian articles and gave lessons on the violin. In none of these things did he attain to any perfection—all his productions were crude and bizarre. The mark of his dilettantism is left on the ruined garden. It is laid out in eccentric walks now deeply overgrown with weeds. Here and there is a worn sun-dial, and a sign displaying a half-obliterated ship in full sail strikes the observer at once. A couple of summer houses, now damp and decaying, complete a picture of ruined Bohemianism that has about it for those who knew the old man, a deep note of pathos. To walk through the house and grounds is to feel that the old dancing master has bequeathed something of his spirit to the stones of the place.

XXV

*AT THE SHRINE OF THE WHITE  
WALL*

“ . . . What might this be? A thousand fantasies  
Begin to throng into my memory,  
Of calling shapes, and beck’ning shadows dire.”

*Milton.*

*At the Shrine of the White Wall*

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THE spirit of romance can never die down in the man who has once strapped his knapsack on his back and gone gaily afoot through the world. In quiet moments, when the traffic of the city is left far behind, he will dream once more of the magic of the long, white road, and the wonder that lies beyond. It is only your true vagabond who can keep abreast of that illustrious pair, Don Quixote and Gil Blas, without occasionally skipping a barren tract of country, and he it is who, bustling past the crowd, takes that picturesque scoundrel Casanova to his arms, and welcomes him as a friend and a brother. No one should set out to walk seriously who has not first journeyed hand in hand with the giants of the road. They make him free of his craft. They give colour and imagination to his pilgrimage, and awaken in him that delightful mood of expectation which constitutes half the charm of the business. He will then be able to see, as Hazlitt did, the picture of Mambrino's immortal helmet glittering in the sun.

All my adventures on foot have become suddenly strange and romantic in the light of the afterglow which is inherited from the company of these great ones.

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## *At the Shrine of the White Wall*

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I was thinking the other day of a hot and dusty July afternoon in the heart of Normandy the summer before the war ; and, if ever my wandering fortunes should carry me into that part of the world again, I must immediately pay my devoirs at the old farmstead of St. Lac. It rests in picturesque solitude in one of those delicious valleys that bring refreshment and gladness to the soul of the tired traveller.

The shadows were just beginning to creep over the golden fields of wheat when we reached a long white wall that bounded one side of the house. It was a scene to cozen the loiterer ; under the whiteness of the wall there stretched a fresh carpet of greensward which had escaped the rays of the burning sun, and presented a halting-place of delightful coolness. Then there hung over the valley, where not a single human being was to be seen, that indescribable sense of quiet and restfulness which comes to these far-away spots at the close of a summer's day.

We threw ourselves down near the wall, my friend and I. What a relief to be rid of the intolerable weight of the knapsack, and get the glare of the sun out of our eyes ! How long we lay there I cannot say. I must have been dozing for some minutes when my eyes wandered to the face of the ancient white-washed wall before me. I made out certain irregularly drawn lines in black chalk, and, piecing them together, it seemed to me that they made up a picture of some sort. I rubbed my eyes. I was surely awake ! Then I thought of that pair of students in "Gil Blas" who went together from Pennafiel to Salamanca. Being tired and thirsty, they sat down by a spring they met with on the



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## *At the Shrine of the White Wall*

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road. While they were resting there they perceived on a stone some letters that were partly worn away by time and the weather. They threw water on the stone, and read, it will be remembered, "Here lies the soul of the Licentiate Peter Garcias." One of the students laughed at the ridiculous idea of a soul being shut up, and walked away. His fellow traveller, less of a sceptic, dug round the stone with a knife, and unearthed a purse of a hundred ducats, and a card which bore the inscription, "Whosoever thou art that hast wit enough to discover the meaning of the inscription; inherit my money, and make a better use of it than I have done!"

My friend, who is an artist of the pencil, was soon interested, and at his suggestion I crossed to the other side of the narrow road, and at a distance of about twenty yards got the right perspective.

On the wall was drawn a life-size bust of Napoleon, perfect in execution, and evidently the work of an accomplished draughtsman. The Little Corporal was depicted in the tight-fitting great coat, and was wearing the three-cornered hat which has become a sacred Napoleonic tradition.

"Who can have been the artist?" I asked, in admiration of the picture.

"Clearly a man who knows how to draw," said my companion, preparing to make a miniature copy in his sketch-book. "Maybe a vagrant Bohemian holidaying from the Quartier Latin or a staunch Bonapartist who yearned thus to leave the mark of his God by the wayside!"

The drawing had evidently been there for some time. Some of the lines were faded slightly by the rains, and in

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## *At the Shrine of the White Wall*

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one or two places bits of crumbling stone, blackened by the weather, only seemed to heighten the astonishing accuracy of the likeness.

"It must have taken the man several hours to draw that," said my companion. "I wonder if the people who live in this sleepy little house are aware of the honour that has been done them?"

At that moment the sound of an iron gate closing sharply broke the stillness of the afternoon. We both turned in the direction whence the noise came, and for a moment only we saw the vision of a beautiful girl dressed wholly in white; she was hatless, and her black curly hair hung over her shoulders in rich curls. She smiled on us with a smile that seemed to have in it a suggestion of sadness, and then disappeared through the gate.

It was at that moment that I felt a terrible sickness creeping over me. The walk in the hot sun had been too much, even for me, seasoned walker that I was. My friend had wisely travelled some distance by train and picked me up at luncheon at a wayside café on the road to Avranches. I had protested against his too leisurely habit of lingering by the road over a pipe, and quoted with much unction the words of Christian to By-Ends: "If you will go with us you must go against Wind and Tide, the which I perceive is against your opinion."

Now I was to pay for my folly. The vision of the girl had barely faded away before I seemed to perceive a blinding flash of light which leapt down the long white road to meet me; a roar as of the sounding of tumultuous seas broke on my ears, and I lapsed into unconsciousness.

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## *At the Shrine of the White Wall*

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When I opened my eyes, I was lying on a couch in the farmhouse. I heard the voice of my friend, which seemed to come from miles away, arranging with one of the men to drive us to the nearest railway station. Then I fell into a state of semi-consciousness again. I dreamt the most delectable of dreams. Into those dreams were curiously wrought all the events of the last few hours. The lady of my vision, now more ethereal than ever, and looking, it seemed to me, like the sad pictures of Josephine at the saddest moments of her life, was engaged before a huge white canvas, on which she drew the magic lineaments of Napoleon. Then on the scene there came another woman, proud and disdainful, and she pushed the artist roughly out of the way, and blotted out her work. How my sun-ridden brain must have tumbled to pieces at the sights and impressions of the day ! For the chalk bust became a full-length figure of *Le Petit Caporal* ; it stepped out of the white stone frame, and took the fair lady in its arms, whilst the other lady looked on in anger. Then I thought of Aucassin and Nicolette, that most delightful of French songs :—

“Aucassin, the fair, the bright,  
The amorous, the gentle knight  
From the deep wood issuing out  
Claspeth arms his love about.”

I remember little of the journey back to Rouen. It was merely the dim background to an ever-changing panorama of gorgeous dreams in which, in some shape or other, and under all manner of varying circumstances, I witnessed the adventures of a Napoleonic knight, and his brave lady.

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## *At the Shrine of the White Wall*

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Sometimes the call of battle came, and the knight parted with his love in true mediæval style. Always, when she was sad, I saw her kneeling at the shrine of the white wall, where her fingers traced lovingly the picture of the great soldier.

Two or three days after my recovery from delirium, due to a slight sunstroke, we were at *déjeuner* in the hotel. A motor-car snorted its way into the courtyard and a moment later My Lady of The Vision—the one who had appeared for a moment at the gate of the farmhouse—sat down at the table. My companion recognised her instantly, and spoke to me. She was dressed wholly in white, as on the day we first saw her, and there was in her face that look of grave sadness which had haunted me in my dreams. I resolved on a bold course.

“Give me that sketch of yours,” I said to my friend, and he tore it out of his book. I passed the lady the menu with the sketch at the back of it. It fell loosely on to the table, and she picked it up. When she saw the picture she smiled wistfully, just as she had done at the white gate, and passed it back to me without a word.

We held no conversation. She left again in the motor-car an hour later. Who she was I do not know, and perhaps she could throw no more light on that wayside picture than could the people of the farm. It must have been done before they settled there, they told my friend. And yet I do not care to disturb the romance I have built around that chalk drawing, and the beautiful lady with the sad eyes at the shrine of the White Wall. It might mayhap turn out that my Dulcinea was a frivolous demoiselle, who

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## *At the Shrine of the White Wall*

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had passed the White Wall a dozen times and seen nothing more than a few idle chalk marks.

Like Don Quixote, I would cherish my dreams. "On thy arrival what was the queen of beauty doing? I suppose thou foundest her stringing pearls, or embroidering some device with threads of gold for this her captive knight." "No!" answered Sancho. "I found her winnowing ten bushels of wheat in the backyard."



XXVI

*SHAKESPEARE'S EARLIEST CRITICS*



“ To the opera, and there saw ‘ Romeo and Juliet,’ the first time it was ever acted ; but it is a play in itself the worst that ever I heard.” “ To the King’s Theatre, where we saw ‘ Midsummer’s Night’s Dream,’ which I had never seen before, nor ever will again, for it is the most insipid, ridiculous play that ever I saw in my life.” “ Went to the King’s House, and there saw a silly play and an old one, ‘ The Taming of the Shrew.’ ” “ To the King’s Playhouse, and there saw ‘ The Merry Wives of Windsor,’ which did not please me at all in no part of it.” “ To the King’s House, and here saw the so-much-cried-up play of ‘ Henry VIII.,’ which, though I went with resolution to like it, is so simple a thing, made up of a great many patches, that besides the shows and processions in it, there is nothing in the world good or well done.”

“ *Pepys’ Diary.*”

*Shakespeare's Earliest Critics*


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**T**O an age which accepts Shakespeare as an unassailable Fact, there must always appear something ridiculously small and tinkering in the pedantic sophistries of eighteenth-century criticism. When we see the Rhymers, the Dennis's, the Popes, and a whole host of lesser critics, armed with the "rules" of the drama, attempting solemnly to measure and appraise the irregular genius of Shakespeare, admitting this and rejecting that, lopping a branch here and engrafting one there, the most natural thing in the world is to say with Sheridan:—

"Such puny patronage but hurts the cause."

But one must not forget that this slavish adhesion to the Aristotelian rules was less the fault of the critics than of the age itself. All the poets and critics of the eighteenth century had been taught to respect the unities of time and place, to insist on chronological succession, and to condemn those writers who neglected to differentiate strictly between tragedy and comedy. The genius of Shakespeare rose superior to all the rules, but the critics of the century, excepting perhaps Johnson and Capel, lost sight of that genius in their concern for the orthodoxy of the drama.

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## *Shakespeare's Earliest Critics*

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There is a well-grounded belief that Shakespeare has received from posterity the honour and recognition which were withheld or only grudgingly bestowed by his contemporaries and the critics in the immediate post-Shakespearean period ; and in a large sense this is strictly true.

Nothing can be plainer to the student of Shakespearean criticism for at least a hundred years or more after the poet's death than the utter failure of the critics to grasp the universality of the man's genius and the psychological significance of his work. Two exceptions might be named, Johnson and Maurice Morgann—the former in spite of his noble panegyric cannot, however, refrain from peddling criticism ; but Morgann ranks himself among the idolaters and sees far into the future. In his "Essay on the Dramatic Character of Sir John Falstaff," he pictures an occasion when "a fellow like Rhymer, waking from his trance, shall lift up his Constable's staff, and charge this great magician, this daring practiser of arts inhibited in the name of Aristotle, to surrender ; whilst Aristotle himself, disowning his wretched officer, should fall prostrate at his feet, and acknowledge his supremacy." This was written in 1717 ; and it is an unaccountable thing that the book from which it is taken should be unknown to the majority of Shakespearean students. Morgann deserves our gratitude for his splendid championship of Shakespeare, at a time when it was not generally recognised that if Webster and Heywood, Jonson and Ford and Fletcher, and all the rest were obliterated at a stroke the English stage would still be filled with the splendour of Shakespeare's genius. I like him because he seems to have resented

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## *Shakespeare's Earliest Critics*

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strongly the irritating attentions of the commentators and editors and critics, and because he gave Voltaire and the school that followed him a bit of his mind. Here is another extract :—

“ When the hand of time shall have brushed off his present editors and commentators, and when the very name of Voltaire, and even the memory of the language in which he has written shall be no more, the Apalachian mountains, the banks of the Ohio, and the plains of Scotia shall resound with the accents of this Barbarian. In his native tongue he shall roll the genuine passions of Nature ; nor shall the griefs of Lear be alleviated, or the charms and wit of Rosalind be abated by time.”

The name of “ this Barbarian ” is known to almost every one who can read and write, whilst the authors from whom he borrowed and the critics who furnished him with rules are forgotten. Perhaps the finest phrase of all phrases describing the immortality of Shakespeare belongs to Johnson. “ The stream of time,” he said, “ which is continually washing the dissoluble fabrics of other poets, passes without injury by the adamant of Shakespeare.” That sentence could only have been penned by the author of the famous letter to Lord Chesterfield.

Eighteenth-century criticism, even when, as in the case of Johnson and Morgann, it was above concerning itself with the pedantries of the schools, failed to judge of Shakespeare's work from a purely æsthetic standpoint, and apparently never realised his marvellous gifts of characterisation.

Johnson was most rigidly devoted to the idea that the central aim in any work of the imagination should be didactic. He admired Richardson very much and inserted

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## *Shakespeare's Earliest Critics*

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a laudatory notice of "Clarissa" at the foot of an essay which its author contributed to "The Rambler." In this same publication there is a paper dated 1750 written to show that it is not a sufficient vindication of a character that it is drawn as it appears; for, contends the author of "Rasselas"—

"many characters ought never to be drawn . . . and the purpose of these writings is to teach mankind the means of avoiding the snares which are laid by Treachery for Innocence, without infusing any wish for that superiority with which the betrayer flatters his vanity; to give the power of counteracting fraud without the temptation to practise it; to initiate youth by mock encounters in the art of necessary defence and to increase prudence without impairing virtue."

Shakespeare's fine disregard for what is called "poetic justice," as shown, for example, in the deaths of Banquo and Duncan, and Lady Macduff and her children, Desdemona, Cordelia, Kent, and King Lear, hardly squares with Johnson's theory that the wicked should perish and the innocent be spared. The fact of course is that the Shakespearean Theatre was as fond of blood and direful tragedy as it was of high-flown rhetoric, and the poet, by killing off nearly every one in "Hamlet" and writing such speeches as abound in "Coriolanus," exhibited a nimble adaptability to the demands of his patrons. Dr. Johnson defended Tate's version of "Lear" in which the King and Cordelia are left alive, and the Fool is omitted from the play. Such a line as this, at any rate, is indefensible, for by common consent it is the pathetic fidelity of the Fool to Lear through all the vicissitudes of fortune, rewarded as it is by the loving attachment of the King, that imparts

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## *Shakespeare's Earliest Critics*

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to this woe-inspiring tragedy a touch of relief that makes its living presentation on the stage nearly tolerable.

But Johnson's taste in literature, high as it is, does not make him a safe guide where Shakespeare is concerned. He has another paper in "The Rambler" dealing with the improprieties of writing and the disgust excited by inappropriate images, and there we find him sternly pillorying Shakespeare. The commentators of the time were oftentimes equally impervious to the beauty of Shakespeare's lines. Keats, who had such an exquisite appreciation of the right word, got hold of one of the early folios, and observed that these gentlemen had managed to "twist many beautiful passages into common-places." In "Troilus and Cressida," for example, the lines—

"I have (as when the sunne doth light a-scorne)  
Buried this sigh in wrinkle of a smile,"

are changed by the substitution of the word "storm" for "a-scorne." To few poets have the beauties of Shakespeare's imagery made a more instant appeal than to Keats, and it was his pride that he discovered a great many. One such discovery may be noted :—

"Blunt wedges rive hard knots; the seeded Pride  
That hath to this maturity blown up  
In rank Achilles must or now be cropt,  
Or shedding breed a Nursery of like evil  
To over-bulke us all."

Keats wrote of this :—

"Blown up. One's very breath while leaning over these pages is held for fear of blowing this line away—as easily as the gentlest breeze

Robs dandelions of their fleecy crowns."



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## *Shakespeare's Earliest Critics*

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It is an unfailing mark of Shakespeare's genius that he always gets the most expressive word, or the word that fits best the thought he wishes to express, and all Shakespearean students must, as Hazlitt has pointed out, have found that any but the true word is sure to sound wrong.

Any review of the eighteenth-century criticism of Shakespeare must lead to the inevitable conclusion that the man was not then appreciated at his full stature ; whilst at the same time it inspires a feeling of wonder that audiences who demanded so much bloodshed and crude work could be found to enjoy such exquisite passages of poetry. "Mellifluous," "sweet," and "gentle" were some of the expressions used towards his plays. How inapplicable, for example, they are to that great and thrilling scene in the third act of "Macbeth," where Macbeth calls to his aid in impassioned poetry all the spirits of evil :—

"Come, seeling night,  
Scarf up the tender eye of pitiful day ;  
And with thy bloody and invisible hand  
Cancel and tear to pieces that great bond  
Which keeps me pale ! Light thickens ; and the crow  
Makes wing to the rooky wood :  
Good things of day begin to droop and drowse ;  
Whiles night's black agents to their preys do rouse.  
Thou marvell'st at my words: . . ."

After all, some of the Rhymers had better have thought of Shakespeare as did Gray ; he was of opinion that—

"the poet was open to criticism of every kind, but he should not care to be the person who undertook it."



XXVII

*THE BOY AND WHAT HE READS*

" Boys are a necessary evil, growing into an unnecessary good."  
*Anon.*

" ' Robinson Crusoe ' contains more religion, more philosophy, more psychology, more political economy, more anthropology than are found in many learned treatises on these special subjects."  
*Frederic Harrison.*

*The Boy and What he Reads*


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“**A**BOVE all,” wrote Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, that enthusiastic lover of books, to her daughter, Lady Bute, “teach your children to love reading.” Schoolmasters and librarians have long discussed the question of juvenile reading; they have drawn up lists of “best books”—a polite way of shoving the immortals down other people’s throats—and stimulated publishers to multiply Dickens and Thackeray, and Fenimore Cooper and Henty; and yet, in spite of it all, I rather fancy that the average city boy has, on the whole, remained faithful to those transpontine stories of blood and fire which are so sternly repudiated by the cultured Olympians. Any traveller in trains, trams, ’buses, or the occupier of a seat at a popular place of entertainment, must now and again have seen the Boy I mean furtively disentangle from his back pockets one of those gaily-coloured supplements, and devour it with as much avidity as he would an apple. It is good to see any one so ready to be illuded. Nowadays the magic of old Dumas and Sir Walter, and Thackeray and even Don Quixote and old Sancho Panza does not seem to capture some of us so completely as it did in the long ago.

Few men remain so buoyantly young as Stevenson, who

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## *The Boy and What he Reads*

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by virtue of that very fact was able to produce what is incontestably the finest boy's tale of our generation. It is not at all a simple thing to guide the average boy along the path which will lead him to the best things in literature. And you certainly cannot drive him. To begin with he demands a spacious stage, and the play of the great elemental passions, blood, hate, revenge; for subtle finished writing and psychology he does not care a rap. He has no more imagination than a dog or a horse; he must have action, movement, colour, in all his stories, no matter how extravagant, now unreal, how bloodthirsty they are. Above all there must not be a dash of sentimentality, or he will feel only a pitying contempt for the author and refuse to read any further.

It is also well to remember that where the reader of the thrilling "shocker" is concerned, no question ever arises as to the methods of supply and distribution. The boy once gets the fever and henceforth reads steadily through a course of Texas Jacks and Arizona Joes, until one evil day he abandons books altogether for the newspapers. That is a retrograde step; there is at any rate romance and glamour and the pageantry of dreams about some of these poor things, be they literature or not. The daily newspaper deals in ugly realities.

It once occurred to me to inquire how it came about that the average office boy of limited resources was able to replenish his stock of these stories so easily. Students of these matters will be interested to know that in the course of my researches, I found a well-recognised repository for "shockers" of all kinds, and to this repository boys

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## *The Boy and What he Reads*

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repaired and exchanged for a copper the books they had just read. The keeper of this shop was a dingy old philosopher of sixty, a crooked little man who quoted Pope and Byron and read the Latin and Greek authors in the original. He was one of those men who seem to have been born among books; and whenever you visited the shop there he sat among his collection of gay-backed booklets, quietly reading Shakespeare or Marcus Aurelius—a fit figure for Charles Lamb to spin out an essay about. There were thousands of volumes of sensational literature about him, most of them ear-marked, dirty, and worn with much service. The old man trafficked in this class of literature, and was proud of the fact. He used to say that so long as boys were taught to read at all, it did not matter very much at first what they did read. All other things would be given unto them. He used occasionally to read a few pages of these weird tales, and was once caught with a copy of “Deadwood Dick” in his hand. The visitor expressed surprise. “Do you remember,” he said, “the reply of Mrs. Battle to the young man who saw no harm in unbending in a hand at whist after his literary labours? She unbent her mind after whist over a book. I unbend mine over ‘Deadwood Dick.’—Look!—I have reached a passage of great interest:—

“ ‘At the same moment the sharp report of a pistol rang out upon the air, and without a word or a moan Deadwood Dick reeled and tumbled out of the saddle. The same shot had cut away a ringlet of Myrtle McLean’s hair in its passage.’ ”

I read this story myself and was delighted by the splendid recklessness of it all. The touches of crude melodrama

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## *The Boy and What he Reads*

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and the immaturity of style passed unnoticed once I was in the grip of the tale. After all it is not a far cry from tales like this to the splendours of "Monte Cristo" and the romance of Fenimore Cooper's fights with Red Indians.

Bad and indifferent books are often popular because the boys who read them lack proper guidance at the moment the wonders of print are opening out to their imagination. No healthy boy can resist "Tom Brown's Schooldays," and though he has a partiality for pirates, the story of "Henry Esmond, Esq."—that incomparable hero of an almost incomparable tale—will in nine cases out of ten draw him indoors on a fine day. I would not venture to say so much for "Pendennis"; he is more for the adolescent, who has seen something of the world and been caught by the flutter of a Fotheringay petticoat. Those crooked and unnatural little creatures in Dickens's gallery of boys are nearly always popular; Smike and the Artful Dodger and Fagin are caricatures, but the same primitive instinct which leads a boy to place a dwarf or a sword-swallower on a higher artistic level than Irving or Melba warms him towards these strange abnormalities.

But children differ greatly in their tastes. Most little girls delight in "Alice in Wonderland," and boys regard it as "rot." "Robinson Crusoe" shares with "Monte Cristo" and "Gulliver's Travels" the allegiance of all boys, be they readers of "shockers" or not; and it is perhaps a pity that girls have so few classics.









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